

Ideology and Power in Pre-Code Comic Books:
Struggles for Cultural Space, Audience, and Meaning

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Introduction

This research project started out as something quite different. I initially intended to write nothing less than a history of reflexivity in comic books, that is, I wanted to examine the various forms and functions of comic-book reflexivity from the medium's beginnings until today. I eventually realized, however, that in order to appreciate the commercial and ideological functions of reflexive devices I first needed to gain a better understanding of the medium's systems of production, consumption, and textuality;¹ and in order to comprehend the changes that the various forms of comic-book reflexivity have gone through, I first needed to examine how comic books have intersected with the economic, political, social, and cultural forces of their time. In other words, I needed to build my investigation of comic-book reflexivity on an analysis of the medium's history from a cultural studies perspective. Since a thorough analysis of that kind did not exist, I decided to make such a study my new project. I broadened the scope of my research until the investigation of reflexive devices came to represent merely one aspect of a wider investigation of comic-book textuality's ideological dimension and of the power discourses underlying the medium's systems of production and consumption. To create space for such a broadened approach, I limited my investigation to the pre-Code era.

In the tradition of recent academic works such as Bradford W. Wright's groundbreaking *Comic Book Nation*, David Hajdu's *The Ten-Cent Plague*, and Paul Lopes' *Demanding Respect*, this project articulates pre-Code comic books within the historical discourses from which they emerge and in which they have their effects. However, while previous academic works tend to focus on comic-book production and reception/consumption, my study aims to situate comic books within a well-balanced system of not only production and consumption but also textuality. Bradford W. Wright characteristically argues that "there

are intellectual pitfalls in analyzing something like comic books too deeply” (xviii). By contrast, this study’s in-depth examination of pre-Code comic books and their meaning-making and pleasure-producing potential hopes to provide new insights into the industry’s persistent struggles for meanings, cultural space, and an audience, insights whose relevance transcends the field of comic-book research.

My investigation of the pre-Code era’s comic-book market draws on a wide range of theories and concepts developed in the field of cultural studies. I will now outline those theories and concepts that are central to this project’s theoretical frame.

Italian neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci suggests that capitalist societies maintain their stability through a combination of force (e.g., police, prisons, military) and “hegemony.” The term “hegemony” is understood by Gramsci as the winning of consent to unequal class relations within capitalist societies, that is, as the process whereby the subordinate are persuaded to consent to the system that subordinates them. Hegemony’s ideological domination, however, is acknowledged by Gramsci to necessarily meet with resistance, as the subordinate constantly compete with the dominant for cultural, intellectual, and political leadership. The life of the capitalist state, Gramsci’s “civil society,” is thus marked by a variety of struggles between “incorporation” and “resistance.” This concept of the “civil society” as contested terrain set neo-Marxist theory free from the classical Marxist notion of the state as instrument of class domination, and correspondingly from the economic determinism that had restricted the relevance not only of classical Marxism, but also of the Frankfurt School.ⁱⁱ

Instituted by Birmingham University’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in 1964, British Cultural Studies – today widely known and hence in this paper referred to simply as “cultural studies” – adopted the theories of Gramsci for the field of media studies. Building on Gramsci’s concept of “civil society,” cultural studies argues that the central

political division in capitalist societies is the opposition between “the power bloc” and “the people.” The term “power bloc” is defined as a constantly shifting alliance of various forces of domination such as the government, the educational system, or the culture industries; the term “the people” refers to a shifting alliance consisting of elements whose unity is constituted by their relationship to a particular discourse of dominant ideology. As the power struggles of capitalist societies are acknowledged to take place not only in the economic arena between classes, but in various arenas between constantly shifting alliances, the class discourse is displaced from the privileged position classical Marxism reserved for it.

While the Frankfurt School cast “mass culture” as a mere tool of class domination, cultural studies argues that “popular culture”ⁱⁱⁱ mirrors the state’s ongoing process of negotiations between dominant and subordinate groups: The state’s political struggle is viewed to manifest itself in the sphere of popular textuality as a struggle for meanings, as a contradictory mix of competing values, of intentions and counter-intentions. John Fiske, whose work has been of particular influence on this paper, writes:

“Popular culture always is part of power relations; it always bears traces of the constant struggle between domination and subordination, between power and various forms of resistance to it or evasions of it, between military strategy and guerilla tactics.”^{iv}

Cultural studies agrees with the Frankfurt School that popular culture is a central tool in hegemony’s ideological domination. It admits that popular culture has a strong tendency to naturalize the status quo, that is, to render the unequal capitalist system of property ownership, power, and material rewards into the form of common sense, making it appear to have no alternative. Contrary to the Frankfurt School, however, cultural studies insists that the culture industry’s control over its products can never be absolute. The culture industry, it claims, has to compromise with the interests of the consumer because

commodities serving *only* the economic and ideological interests of the dominant would fail to provide popular pleasure^v and thus be rejected by the consumer. This ability of the consumer to reject products that don't provide him or her with pleasure is argued to be a "crucial factor" in the cultural economy.^{vi}

Cultural studies argues that popular culture arises from the capitalist system's mode of production, from its social division of labor between the capitalist owners of the means of production (the dominant, the backers) and the workers who only have their labor-power to sell (the subordinates, the performers). It claims that popular culture is created by subordinates who naturally resent their subordination, and are thus inclined to deliver a text that encourages subversive reading positions. At the same time, however, creators of popular culture must compromise with the dominant they depend on to provide the resources necessary for production. The dominant has an ideological interest in a text that encourages the reader to make sense of it in a way that serves the dominant's interests. Still, producers of popular culture are just as conflicted as its creators, for their economic interests call for products that attract a popular audience. In order to be popular, a text needs to be "open" to a variety of different reading positions; it needs to employ devices that enable a variety of readers to attach personal meaning to it; it needs to have points of relevance and provide pleasure to a variety of readers in a variety of social contexts.

The consumer of popular culture is argued by cultural studies to be engaged in ideological practice while consuming, for every act of consumption involves the production of meaning. Meaning is not understood as some kind of producer-controlled fixed and absolute entity inscribed in the text for the reader to decode and ultimately accept. Rather, it is cast as an ongoing process that can only ever be contingent and contextual, as it is always open to the reader's ever-changing perspective and input. Textual agencies of cultural commodities may propose or promote certain reading positions and meanings, but are

ultimately unable to control them. The commodity's narrative can be read under the terms of these textual agencies, or it can be read in opposition to them. The hegemony of the text is never total. No matter how hard the culture industry may try to close the meaning of a commodity around one specific reading, it always remains polysemic. The struggle for meanings, Lawrence Grossberg insists, "takes place over and within the sign" (157), as every sign is multi-accentual and open to various reading positions.

This view of the consumer/reader as producer of meaning is particularly relevant to the analysis of the comic-book medium, for comic-book readers are required to produce a continuing narrative by actively connecting the given static panel content. Art Spiegelman ambiguously refers to comics as "a gutter medium," implying not only the medium's low cultural prestige, but also the active role of its reader: "It's what takes place in the gutters between the panels that activates the medium" (1997: 9). The comic-book reader him- or herself creates the product's narrative rhythm, that is, decides the pace of moving from one panel to the next and of turning the pages. Based on the theories of Marshall McLuhan, John Fiske accordingly describes comics as a "cool medium," a medium of "low definition" that provides only "limited data, so the audience has to participate, to be active, in order to complete the message" (O'Sullivan *et al.*: 176-77).^{vii}

Not only casual consumers, to be sure, but also critical analysts of popular culture are cast by cultural studies as producers of meaning. Critical analysts may attempt or pretend to provide an objective and unbiased reading but, in the words of Stuart Hall, "there will always be specificities – of voices, of positioning, of identity, of cultural traditions, of histories, and these are the conditions of enunciation which enable us to speak" (2005f: 407). Cultural studies insists that an analytical or interpretative narrative, no matter how loosely conceived, can never be inherent in the cultural commodity itself; it can never be an objective and unchangeable accumulation of facts but must always be shaped by the

analyst's personal and environmental specifics. In order to construe cultural commodities within discourse, any analyzing system requires active, intentional, and directed engagement – what cultural studies refers to as “articulation.” An articulation is the cultural analyst's attempt to produce a meaningful interpretive “unity” by relating an aspect of the complex and often contradictory sphere of textuality to historical discourses deemed relevant to it. The cultural analyst must always be aware of the fact, though, that the ascription of a textual unit to a certain historical discourse is never self-evident. There can never be one single, “correct” discursive reading. Different readings of the same cultural commodity are always possible, and so are, as Antony Easthope points out, “real, jarring inconsistencies between different readings” (1991: 35). An articulation can thus never achieve ultimate closure, and cultural studies accepts this lack of closure along with the insufficiency of the text.

The job description cultural studies is left with is a modest one, outlined by Stuart Hall like this:

“You are going to have to operate your analysis of meaning without the solace of closure: more on the basis of... semantic raids... – to find the fragments, to decipher their assembly and see how you can make a surgical cut into them...” (2005g: 137).

“Semantic raids” as understood by Hall do not analyze cultural commodities for and by themselves. Rather, they situate cultural texts in their historical conjunctures, articulate them with the very social forces that ensure their circulation, uncover hidden forms of domination while promoting resources for resistance. While the results of semantic raids can never be of any definite, fixed nature, Stuart Hall nevertheless insists that what he calls their “arbitrary closure” (2005a: 264) has political relevance, and that this political relevance is at the very heart of cultural studies:

“It is a serious enterprise, or project, and that is inscribed in what is sometimes called the ‘political’ aspect of cultural studies. Not that there’s one politics already inscribed in it. But there is something at stake in cultural studies” (263).

There is not one specific politics inscribed in it, but cultural studies connects its research to a progressive political agenda, defining it as strategic political intervention. The concept of intellectual practice as politics, rooted in the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, produces, as Hall elaborates, an inevitable and permanent “tension” between theoretical and political questions, a tension *respected* by a cultural studies that “allows the one to irritate, bother and disturb the other, without insisting on some final theoretical closure” (272).

Despite such political ambitions, however, the political relevance of cultural studies has recently been called into question. Douglas Kellner and John Storey argue that cultural studies’ occasionally dogmatic focus on the consumer’s active role in the creation of meaning, best understood as an attempt to compensate for the economic determinism proposed by the Frankfurt School, undermines its progressive political agenda. They call for a more balanced approach designed to restore valuable perspectives of political economy and thus cultural studies’ political relevance, a multiperspectival approach that, in the words of Kellner, “pays attention to the production of culture, to the texts themselves, and to their reception by the audience” (42). I intend to align this study with the pleas of Kellner and Storey for a rediscovery of issues of production that avoids the Frankfurt School’s perception of textuality as a mere reflection of economic relations, that is, for a cultural studies that situates its object of analysis within a well-balanced system of production, consumption, and textuality.

Cultural analysts such as Bell Hooks and Eric Lott have positioned themselves under the rubric of multiculturalism, focusing their attention on cultural representations of various minority groups and thus enlarging the cultural studies approach much like feminist theories have enlarged it since the 1970s. While feminist studies have expanded the concept of ideology critique to include the dimension of gender, multiculturalist approaches insist that society and its popular culture are structured around a complex matrix of axes of difference. Establishing factors such as race, ethnicity, nationality, and age as structuring principles of our social and symbolic worlds, multiculturalism articulates a wide range of cultural representations of domination, resistance, and identity. As a result, not only classism and sexism, but also racism, nationalism, ageism, and other discourses promoting oppression are increasingly being investigated by cultural analysis – a trend I intend to continue with this study.

The critical approaches of cultural studies and of the various schools that have developed in its wake share two essential aspects. First, they all link their research to interventionist political commitments. Second, none of them connects this research to either a specific theory or a concrete, formally delineated, and neatly packaged procedure. At the centre of cultural studies, according to Stuart Hall, is no specific theory or method but “the question of the politics of culture and the culture of politics” (2005f: 396). A complex and vast system of power discourses is relevant to “the politics of culture” as well as to “the culture of politics,” and this system of discourses constantly transforms as historical power structures shift. An analyzing system aiming to remain politically relevant over time therefore requires a flexible analytical strategy; it must be able to adjust and readjust constantly to the ever-changing epistemological positions and conditions. Even within the boundaries of a relatively short and clearly defined historical period, cultural artifacts can be articulated with a wide range of different discourses, some of which may be privileged

and others disadvantaged by a formally delineated critical approach. Making a specific analytical procedure or theoretical concept a requirement would thus run the risk of promoting some discourses while neglecting others – a risk none of the critical approaches cultural studies has produced wants to take.

All theories and analytical procedures are understood by cultural studies as mere conceptual constructs meant to perform certain explanatory or interpretive tasks, as the products of specific social discourses and institutions they are unable to transcend. As a result, in the words of Kellner, theories “illuminate specific phenomena and... also have certain blind spots and limitations which restrict their focus” (24). Rejecting the totalizing claims of “master discourses” such as psychoanalysis or Marxism, cultural studies suggests a more modest conception of theory, a conception Stuart Hall explains with the metaphor of struggle: “The only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency” (2005a: 265-66). The analytical approach and its theoretical foundation are no longer considered a matter of principle; their relevance and usefulness are no longer declared to be universal, but instead to depend on the task at hand.

In the tradition of post-structuralism, then, cultural studies has adopted a pragmatic, contextualist approach that combines various contemporary theories, using some for certain tasks and others for different ones. I have chosen this contextualist approach for the project at hand because I consider it best suited to trace over time the multiplicity of discourses central to both the coding and the decoding of comic books. These discourses, as I intend to unfold, frequently contradict each other and do not represent the enunciation of one single ideological voice. Any one-sided approach restricted to a particular master discourse would necessarily fail to explore the medium of comic books in its multiplicity and contrariness. In order to provide this study with an adequate heterodoxy and avoid fixed orthodoxies of any kind, I will build on a variety of traditions and theoretical constituents.

This study intends to trace over the course of several decades the comic-book medium's cultural roots, its rise to popularity, and its ongoing struggles for meanings, cultural space, and an audience. Analyzing cultural commodities diachronically means analyzing them as systems of discourses that change over time. In order to be popular, culture needs to be relevant in its time; it needs to produce meanings that are relevant to the everyday lives of its consumers. As a result of this closeness of popular media texts to their social conditions, popular texts provide privileged access to the social realities of their era.^{viii}

Comic books, like all popular texts, take up elements of various concurrent discourses and either establish or suppress them. Meaning results from the ideological struggle between discourses. The dominant role of economic, political, social, and cultural factors must be acknowledged, because the conditions of production, the ways of distribution, and the behavior of consumers are determined by them. I thus intend to examine how certain comic books intersect with economic, political, social, and cultural struggles, how they reproduce the power discourses of their time, and to what degree they serve the interests of domination or resistance. I intend to describe some of these power discourses along with the ideologies they articulate, and trace how they are overlaid or gradually supplanted by newer ones over the years.

When it comes to articulating comic-book characters with the power discourses of their time, I do not read them as psychologically layered and motivated individuals but as encodings of ideology,^{ix} as embodiments of abstract and often contradictory values, and as complex fields of multiple struggles. Social markers of character difference are categories such as race, nationality, class, age, and gender. Comic-book heroes may be published under the same series title over several decades, but their concepts are constantly changing; their fictional identities fluctuate as multiple editors and creators and changing audiences struggle over their definitions. In order to remain popular and maintain their signifying

potential, they must always be articulated with concurrent social concerns; they must be continuously redefined, that is, deconstructed and reconstructed around a basic set of defining characteristics. In the process, they attain mythic stature. Only mythical heroes, Claude Levi-Strauss claims, “can truly be said to return, for their only reality lies in their personification; but human beings die for good” (237).

In contrast to highbrow works of art typically valued for their unique qualities, popular art tends to be generic. Shaping cultural commodities into conventionalized and thus recognizable forms, genres predetermine texts as well as their readings. On the one hand, they help the producers of mass culture calculate audience response and thus limit the commercial risk of production. On the other, they raise expectations among consumers as they both standardize and differentiate the product; they condition the audience response by controlling the text’s polysemic potential, by promoting and organizing intertextual relations. However, the set of conventions that defines a genre is modified as each new example is produced. This study intends to analyze in their historical context generic conventions and the changes they go through, as well as to examine how certain generic conventions can be employed to promote a special kind of relationship between producer, text, and audience, one commonly referred to as fandom.

Stereotypically conceived characters, another trademark of popular culture, are characters lacking distinctive features that might distinguish them from others in the same paradigm. The stereotype makes firm and separate what is in reality fluid and difficult to grasp, singling out certain elements that are meant to function as representatives of a whole.^x Similarly, comic strips and comic books employ a visual sign language that reproduces potentially complex ideas within narrow panel borders. The very language of comics thus relies on stereotypes, that is, on simplified and easily recognizable symbols, as its basic building blocks. The examination of stereotypes in their historical context should

accordingly prove particularly productive for the cultural analysis of comic books, as the displacement of unfavorable characteristics on to certain groups with little power to challenge popular (mis)representations (such as criminals, enemies of war, and minorities) can provide insight into historical power structures. As power discourses change over time, so do the stereotypes that articulate them, along with other manifestations of ideology.

The majority of comic books adopt ideological shifts implicitly, for they are not meant to interfere with the text's illusionistic aesthetic, that is, with the illusion of unmediated enchantment. Some comic books, however, explicitly foreground their intertextual relationships, as well as their own production or reception. In order to demystify the fictional sphere and disrupt the reader's naïve faith in it, they point to themselves as textual constructs, deploying myriad strategies such as authorial intrusions or stylistic virtuosités. The ways in which comic books have undermined the realistic illusion by calling attention to themselves as artifacts have varied by era, by publisher, by genre, and by creator. This study intends to examine some of the functions, commercial and ideological, of various forms of reflexivity, revealing the comic-book industry's various attempts to deal with cultural ambivalences toward the medium and its assumed effects on readers.

Matthew J. Pustz has recently called for "interpretations of reflexive comics that utilize new literary and cultural theories" (213), as such interpretations are almost completely absent from the literature that has been published on comics so far.^{xi} This paper aims to provide such interpretations. The studies of reflexivity in the closely related medium of film by Robert Stam and Christopher Ames have been helpful, but their relevance for this project is limited as they are rather arbitrarily organized around certain reflexive strategies and ultimately shy away from offering any kind of systematic analysis of historical developments in reflexivity. Moreover, the reflexive strategies of comic books have a multiplicity of signifiers such as page layout or drawing style that are meant to create in the reader's mind

the sense of a continuum that extends beyond panel borders – distinctive features of the medium that cannot in every case be translated from those of film. At least for the medium of comic books, this study thus represents a first attempt at systematically analyzing reflexive devices within a matrix of historical, economic, social, political, and ideological factors.

It can be argued that comics lend themselves particularly well to the narrative strategy of reflexivity, that they are more likely than a medium such as film to invite demystifying intrusions because the illusions they create are of a considerably less realistic nature. As the illusion of depth that breathes life into the two-dimensional characters on a comic-book page depends entirely on drawing techniques and on the cooperation of the reader, it can easily be undermined. In addition, panel borders and the necessity of turning the page are constant reminders of the comic book's artificial nature that diminish the temptation to illusionism. It comes as no surprise, then, that comic books have over the years frequently turned a grammar that is potentially harmful to the notion of art as enchantment to their advantage by highlighting the role of mediation, that is, by creating reflexive fiction.

This project's attempt to provide a historical analysis of comic-book reflexivity is part of its wider investigation of the various marketing strategies employed by the comic-book industry over the years. In its attempts to meet certain challenges of the popular market that will be examined below, the comic-book industry generally expresses its marketing strategies in the ideological dimension of its product. Comic books transmit ideology through words, images, characters, myths, generic codes, stereotypes, layout, style, and many other narrative elements. Yet all these elements rarely coalesce into a pure and coherent ideological position, and this study intends to call attention to the potential for resistive readings and to contradictions around which struggles for meanings can be organized. It intends to avoid one-dimensional ideological readings that hide the

multiplicity of textual discourses by reconciling contradictory meanings for the sake of convenient simplifications. Instead, it intends to acknowledge and respect textuality's polysemy by uncovering its inevitable struggle for meanings and by introducing various possible reading positions, even if they should be opposed to the one preferred, that is, primarily propagated by textual agencies.

Accordingly, this study intends to conceptualize comic books as contested terrain across which various discourses struggle for dominance. It intends to analyze their status as commodities in a capitalist economy by articulating them within the broader cultural, economic, social, and political contexts from which they emerge and in which they have their effects. It intends to consider the sources, means, and relations of dominance, control, and subordination, as they are enacted in historically specific social processes and situations. It intends to expose some of the unspoken, implicitly assumed cultural values presented by comic books as "common sense," and to inspect some of their underlying sources of classist, nationalist, racist, sexist, and ageist assumptions. In order to grasp as many of the texts' ideological dimensions as possible within its necessary limitations, this study will combine historical, political, economic, sociological, cultural, and other perspectives.

ⁱ John Fiske suggests the term "textuality" to refer to the meaning-making and pleasure-producing potential of television programs, thus as a replacement for the outmoded literary concept of the organic, self-contained text:

We still need the term, or something like it, to refer to television's meaning-making potential, though we might do better to make it less concrete, less comfortable to handle, and to use the word 'textuality' whose abstraction signals its potentiality rather than its concrete existence... Textuality is realized in the making of sense and the production of pleasure, and central to this process is the inescapable intertextuality of our culture (1999: 537).

To be sure, the realm of textuality cannot be separated from that of consumption (or that of production, for that matter), but even though we should keep this fact in mind the terms are nevertheless useful for this study as structuring principles.

ⁱⁱ Roger Simon points out that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their later writings recognized “that the state could acquire a degree of independence from the economically dominant class, and that a complex relation could develop between classes, political parties and the state” (13). These insights, however, were never reconciled by Marx and Engels with their earlier one-sided notion of the state as an instrument of class domination alone, a neglect that may explain the Frankfurt School’s disregard for the isolated insights provided by the later writings of Marx and Engels, and consequently its failure to adequately describe the nature of “mass culture.” The two conflicting notions of the state that can be found in the writings of Marx and Engels were finally worked into a coherent theory by Antonio Gramsci.

ⁱⁱⁱ The term “mass culture” is rejected by cultural studies, because it is viewed to imply the notion of consumers as a homogeneous, passive mass. Intending to express the view that it is not the culture industry but the people who ultimately choose which commodities they will use in their culture, cultural studies has instead adopted the term “popular culture.”

Moreover, the category of “the popular” is meant to displace that of the culturally “low.” The Frankfurt School cast “mass culture” as “low culture,” a definition based on an elitist idealization of “authentic” or “high art” that cultural studies rejects. The category of “the popular” reflects the belief of cultural studies that the “value” of a cultural commodity cannot be objectively determined, but is always ascribed to a cultural commodity by a cultural system that offers institutional support and social legitimization for some cultural commodities, but not for others. According to Stuart Hall, “the popular” refers to “those forms and practices which are excluded from, and opposed to, the ‘valued,’ the canon” (2005b: 294), while John Fiske has coined the term “official culture” for institutionally supported and socially legitimated cultural commodities.”

^{iv} John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004) 19. Apart from Gramsci, Michel de Certeau has been a major influence on Fiske’s understanding of popular culture. De Certeau views the consumption of popular culture as a series of “guerilla raids” in which subordinate groups challenge dominant power structures by tampering with the “raw materials” provided by the commercial market according to their own needs and interests.

Umberto Eco uses the metaphor of “guerrilla warfare” as well. Decidedly more skeptical about the consumer’s ability to temper with cultural commodities according to his or her own interests, he argues that popular culture needs to be “patrolled by groups of communications guerrillas” in order to “restore a critical dimension to passive reception” (144), and that the popular audience needs to employ a “guerrilla solution” in order to ensure “the survival of man as a responsible being in the Communications era” (144, 142).

^v Popular pleasure, in the words of John Fiske,

results from this mix of productivity, relevance, and functionality, which is to say that the meanings I make from a text are pleasurable when I feel that they are *my* meanings and that they relate to my everyday life in a practical, direct way (2004: 57).

While Fiske admits that the pleasures of popular culture, operating mainly in the domain of semiotic power, “do not translate directly into oppositional politics or social action” (326), he suggests that these pleasures initiate a process he calls “popular change,” an ongoing process that “results in the softening of the harsh extremities of power” (Ibid. 188) and thus increases the probability of resistive action within the social world.

^{vi} Apart from the “financial economy,” which is viewed to be primarily concerned with exchange value and supportive of an ideological homogenization that serves the status quo, Fiske suggests the simultaneous existence of a “cultural economy” primarily focused on use (meanings, pleasures, social identities) and thus more accommodating to the forces of resistance and difference. The relationship between these two economies, Fiske insists, “is not as deterministic as some theorists have proposed” (1999: 539), because “meanings and pleasures cannot be owned or bought and sold in a way that grants proprietorial rights over them to some but denies them to others” (540). He locates “at least equal, if not greater, power in the cultural economy” (542).

^{vii} Photograph and film, on the other hand, are categorized as “hot media,” as they are suggested to be filled with data and thus extend “one single sense” in “high definition” (176). Their audience, then, tends to be receptive and passive. Even though the concepts of “hot” and “cold media” are best understood as relative tendencies rather than a clear antithesis, they are useful to underline the particularly active role of the comic-book reader.

^{viii} Dennis O’Neil claims that comic books reflect the social conditions of their time even more directly and clearly than other popular media:

“More than any other popular art form, commercial comics have mirrored the mood of the audience, possibly because they’re produced so quickly that there isn’t time for the shaping of personal visions; writers and artists must use what’s in the air” (1988: 52).

^{ix} While Marx had a negative concept of ideology, primarily using the term to refer to distorted manifestations of bourgeois thought and never even considering the possibility of an ideology serving the interests of the proletariat, Stuart Hall makes it clear that “we now use [the term ‘ideology’] to refer to all organized forms of social thinking” (2005e: 27). This loosened and neutral concept of ideology detaches the term from its exclusive articulation with the interests of the dominant classes, introducing plurality and historicity to its realm.

Hall’s definition of “ideology” borrows from the theories of V. N. Volosinov. Breaking with the notion of class as an autonomous ideological universe, Volosinov first established the discursive character of ideology. According to him, ideology attempts to stabilize language to a univocal meaning but is ultimately unable to do so, because ideological signs are necessarily multi-accentual and thus provide opportunities for contestation, that is, for a resistive shifting of meaning (Hall 2005e: 40-41). Even though the ideology of a text is no longer guaranteed, Stuart Hall nevertheless remains convinced that the notion of determination should not be completely abandoned by the cultural analyst. Considering the ideas of Raymond Williams, he continues to view a text and the ideological discourses it permits as determined in so far as the act of encoding sets limits for that of decoding:

“Encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate... [However, it] cannot determine or guarantee, in a simple sense, which decoding codes will be employed... We must think, then, of the various articulations in which encoding/decoding can be combined” (1999a: 58-59).

^x It is important to understand that, in the words of Richard Dyer, stereotypes are at root “a particular form... of the wider process by which any human society, and individuals within it, make sense of that society through generalities, patternings and ‘typifications.’” In this respect, stereotypes are necessary and inescapable. Dyer points out two problems with stereotyping, however. First, stereotypes are “liable to be accompanied by a belief in [their] absoluteness and certainty..., a refusal to recognize [their] limitations and partiality, [their] relativity and changeability.” Second, they are “necessarily implicated in the power relations in that society.” As a result, Dyer argues that “it is not stereotypes, as an aspect of human thought and representation, that are wrong, but who controls and defines them, what interests they serve” (1999: 246).

^{xi} One exception of note is a short article by Kannenberg, Jr. on reflexivity in the comic strips of Winsor McCay, published in the *International Journal of Comic Art*, but it is by no means a systematic examination of the subject.

Chapter 1ⁱ

The Evolution of the Comic Book: Codes, Ideology, Language, Format

The Codes of the Comic Book

Long before the arrival of the written word, Paleolithic humans mediated their experiences of the world through images. It was not until around 3100 B.C. that the Sumerians met the challenges of expanding commerce by transforming pictographs into ideograms (cuneiform) that allowed for improved record-keeping. The spheres of characters and images started drifting apart with the development of more abstract hieroglyphs in Egypt around 3000 B.C. Though still based on images, these hieroglyphs referred merely to the sound of a syllable rather than to a thing or action as a whole.

With the advent of the alphabet in Canaan circa 1500 B.C., characters were freed from the necessity of visually resembling the object and were instead linked to phonetic sounds. The first influential books in alphabetic writing were the Jewish scriptures that were later incorporated into the Old Testament, and they marked the arrival of a new kind of religion – one that promoted and demanded literacy while branding the worship of images as sinful idolatry. Cast as God’s chosen form of expression, the word alone was declared to provide access to a privileged sphere of divine truth:

“Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets” (Exodus 32: 15).

The image, on the other hand, was condemned by the second commandment as a channel for potential deception and downfall:

“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God” (Exodus 20: 4-5).

Despite being derivatives of a single origin, the word and the image were thus cast as fundamentally opposed realms.

Attempts at rationalizing this decreed dichotomy between word and image can be traced back to the flawed yet overwhelmingly influential ancient notion of the image as a “natural sign,” a notion Mitchell describes as “the fetish or idol of Western culture” (90). In Plato’s *Cratylus*, Socrates asks the rhetorical question:

“How could anyone ever compose a picture which would be like anything at all, if there were not pigments in nature which resembled the things imitated, and out of which the picture is composed?”

Cratylus confirms: “Impossible” (95). The meaning of words, on the other hand, is viewed by Socrates to rely first and foremost on convention: even though “words should as far as possible resemble things,” the resemblance between words and things “has to be supplemented by the mechanical aid of convention with a view to correctness” (96). While images are thus associated with the simple imitation of nature, words are connoted with a socially and culturally specific realm of “convention.” Words are valued as a distinctly human form of expression articulated with society and culture, whereas images are branded as conveying only a limited and inferior sort of information suitable for “children or simple people” (see below), beings declared to be easily deceivable and thus in need of

being subordinated and controlled in various forms. In the tenth book of the *Republic*, Plato bans representative artists from his Utopia, referring to them as “charlatans”:

“The art of representation is... a long way removed from truth, and it is able to reproduce everything because it has little grasp of anything, and that little is of a mere phenomenal appearance. For example, a painter can paint a portrait of a shoemaker or a carpenter or any other craftsman without understanding any of their crafts; yet, if he is skillful enough, his portrait of a carpenter may, at a distance, deceive children or simple people into thinking it is a real carpenter” (quoted in Shlain: 155).

After the fall of the Roman Empire, general alphabet literacy was fading in Western Europe, and the preservation of the written word became the exclusive privilege of the Church. Faced with the challenge of promoting the Christian doctrine in a largely illiterate society, Pope Gregory the Great (590 to 604 A.D.) decided to overlook the second commandment and allow for representative art to provide objects of worship. But the church authorities realized the subversive potential inherent in the popular image, and reserved for themselves the right to censor it in 787 A.D.: “It is for painters to execute; it is for the clergy to ordain the subjects and govern the procedure” (quoted in Shlain: 266). Byzantium, in contrast, kept both the literary and the artistic traditions inherited from Rome and Greece alive. The two forms of expression eventually clashed when Leo III became the Patriarch in 726 A.D. A sympathizer of the emerging Christian sect of the iconoclasts, he ordered all church murals plastered and all likenesses of the Virgin Mary removed. In an attempt to silence popular protest, the iconoclasts assassinated many artists. In 767 A.D., they beheaded the Patriarch of the Eastern Church for refusing to support their cause.

With the appearance of paper mills in twelfth-century Italy, literacy rates gradually started to recover in Western Europe. By the mid-fourteenth century, an increasingly literate middle class was evolving, shaking up the hierarchies of the Middle Ages and ushering in the Renaissance. It was not until German goldsmith Johannes Gutenberg invented the process of movable type in 1447, though, that printing became the first mass-produced commodity in Western culture.ⁱⁱ While early mass-produced books, predominantly reproductions of religious works in the Latin language, remained limited to the elite, mass-produced individual pictorial prints based on engravings and woodcuts soon started attracting a popular audience. The subversive potential of the printing press was revealed when the Protestant Reformation spread across Europe in the sixteenth century, using mass-produced pamphlets to mobilize the literate and mass-produced pictorial prints to mobilize the illiterate against the monopoly of the Catholic Church.

Relatively inexpensive translations of the Latin Bible and of the writings of Homer and Plutarch began circulating throughout Europe, offering wider access to texts that had previously been available only to a privileged few. The reconnection with classical antiquity resulted in a reevaluation of imagery and in a more open-minded approach toward representative art, and art in general. Pictorial prints found their way into textbooks for illustrative and decorative purposes. It was no surprise, then, that the practice of censorship gained significance during the Renaissance as well, aiming to protect the autocratic monarchies and the Church from “heretical” art and its subversive discourses of political and religious dissent. John Calvin’s highly influential book *Principles of Christian Religion*, originally published in France in 1535 and extended several times over the years, demanded a return to the purity of the Word of God. In order to achieve this goal, Calvin argued, the general public not only had to retransfer the newly won right of interpreting the Bible to a knowledgeable elite, but was also required to once again give up the worship

of all images, even that of the crucifix. In England, the Presbyterians and the Puritans took offense with imagery. In Italy, Pope Paul IV (1555-59) ordered the burning of thousands of books as well as the partial cover-up or complete removal of representative art.

With the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century, the ideological status of “nature,” and accordingly that of the so-called “natural sign,” the image, was drastically lowered. An adequate perception of the world was now declared to depend on procedures such as empirical abstraction, generalization, typification, documentation, and thus, ultimately, on institutionalized education. A distinctly bourgeois, sanitized concept of self emerged, and the power bloc defined itself in strict opposition to popular taste and pleasure. “Nature” was cast as the antagonist that needed to be dominated, as evolutionary competition for survival, as the potentially dangerous Other. Imagery was feared for its potentially subversive accessibility independent from institutionalized education. Fetishism, a central iconoclastic concept of the emerging science of anthropology, was branded as the vulgar, superstitious, degraded worshipping of an image that transfers consciousness into the object, draining the humanity out of the idolater.

In all areas of art and literature, a classical canon marked by the exclusion and devaluation of the culturally “low,” of the sphere articulated with the image, was re-established. The categorical incompatibility of word and image had become a matter of bourgeois identity, and violations to the rule were accordingly degraded and condemned. In his *Laokoon*, originally published in 1766, G. E. Lessing insists on the strict segregation between literature, described as the art of time, on the one hand, and painting, the art of space, on the other hand. Rationalizing the bourgeois fear of imagery, Lessing describes paintings attempting to be “temporal” or to “express universal ideas” as degenerating into an arbitrary method of writing, that is, as ignoring its “proper” and “natural” limitations (129). In the tradition of the ancient notion of the image as simple representation, the

painting's ultimate purpose is viewed by Lessing as limited to an external, rather passive display of physical beauty, to the gratification of the eye (145); poetry, on the other hand, is declared to have the wider sphere, to range over the influential and powerful realm of history and discourse (73, 114). Not surprisingly, Lessing associates painting with femininity and poetry with masculinity.

In spite of such insistence on the categorical incompatibility of word and image, anonymously and inexpensively produced "broadsheets," prints of woodcuts combining the visual depiction of current affairs or religious matters with a few words of description, had flourished in England since the seventeenth century. Occasionally, the narrative was even spread out across multiple juxtaposed panels, foreshadowing the modern comic strip. Once the improved printing techniques of copperplate engraving allowed for more detailed and refined artwork in the early eighteenth century, the drawings became more expressive, often satirical. The popular image increasingly took on narrative and discursive function, refusing to remain within its designated sphere of beauty and passivity while straying into territory that had conventionally been reserved for the word. Caricatures that became known as "comicals" began appearing. It was primarily the image, usually an unflattering portrait of an authority figure, that conveyed the comical's meaning and provoked a specific response from the viewer, but verbal elements were integrated as well.

Taking advantage of the heightened political awareness in Europe after the French Revolution, an industry with branches in every major English city grew up around the comicals in the early nineteenth century. As it became clear that the discourse of aesthetics alone was unable to control the subversive potential of the image, those in power began resorting to the more intimidating discourse of legality, imprisoning and even assassinating many rebellious cartoonists. Nevertheless, the rise of the image in an increasingly industrialized society could not be detained. The comicals' concept of social and political

caricature based on the combination of visual and verbal elements found its way into the emerging magazine market, where it was advanced from 1841 on by a monthly called *Punch*, a popular cartoon magazine that would inspire a flood of imitators over the years.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, mass communication had reached the English colonies in America. Here too it served as a weapon against authority, as both pictorial prints and written pamphlets such as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* from 1776 argued for independence from Great Britain. Following the Revolutionary War, the publishing industry expanded as the new democracy called for an informed citizenry. Caricatures were becoming popular during the war of 1812 between the United States and Great Britain. By the mid-nineteenth century, the establishment of universal public education provided the United States with the highest literacy rate in the world, a development that started challenging the consensual character of culture and thus the hierarchies of taste. When the widened audience began creating a market for popular literature, the power bloc reacted with desperate efforts at censoring the evolving medium in order to prevent the fragmentation of culture, that is, the decentering of its modes of production, its textuality, and its reading strategies. The Industrial Revolution, however, would prove any such attempt futile.

The technological explosion of the Industrial Revolution brought the concept of rapid production and consumption into Western culture, creating a consumer society and starting what is often referred to as the "Communications Revolution." The application of steam and ultimately the discovery of electricity contributed to the creation of a new culture of leisure activity. The rotary press or "Penny Press," developed in 1846, allowed for the inexpensive mass production of newspapers, making them affordable to the general public. Freed from the patronage of the wealthy and the well-educated, a new kind of literature arose that existed primarily to entertain, not to educate or uplift. Penny Presses

published on cheap newsprint the so-called family story papers, collections of popular serialized novels that, due to their format, enjoyed reduced newspaper postal rates. From 1860 on, so-called dime novels introduced and defined genres such as detective, western, pirate, war, and romance.

Targeting primarily a middle-class audience, the first American magazine of graphic humor and political satire, *Puck*, was launched in 1876. It not only delivered a mix of cartoons, verbal fiction, jokes, and puns, but also introduced full color lithography and illustrated advertising to weekly publication. Photography, which had evolved from the wet collodion process to the much quicker and less elaborate dry plate process in the 1870s, no longer required specialized knowledge and became a mass medium after the development of flexible film in 1884 and the box camera in 1888. In the 1890s, it became commercially feasible to reproduce photographs in newspapers, a progression that deeply affected their reporting style and further entrenched the link between the use of images and mass communication.

Early experiments in motion pictures were conducted in the United States and Europe during the late 19th century, at around the same time the comic strip debuted. The Kinetoscope (from Greek: “motion viewer”), patented in 1891, presented individual but closely related pictures in rapid succession, creating the illusion of movement inside a peephole box. Four years later, a camera-projector called the Cinematographe (from Greek: “motion recorder”) freed the filmstrip from its box. Late in the nineteenth century, Georges Méliès introduced extended narrative to a medium previously content with celebrating its own novel effect. In 1903, Edwin S. Porter’s eight-minute movie *The Great Train Robbery* launched the new medium as mass entertainment, adding the tools of ellipses and continuity to its language. It soon became clear that personal artisanship, as practiced by Méliès, was unable to compete economically with the factory production

methods that were starting to develop. The nickelodeons that took over film presentation from vaudeville shows and amusement arcades began to spread across the United States in 1905 and required a large number of motion pictures each week. According to estimates, nickelodeons across the country drew eighty million admissions per week in 1908, at a time when the entire population of the United States was about one hundred million. Many immigrants pouring into the cities at the time spoke little or no English, but even they could enjoy the silent films' universal language of pantomime for an affordable admission fee of only five cents.

The consensual character of culture and the hierarchies of taste had started dissolving in the course of the nineteenth century, at a time when literacy was spreading rapidly and books were becoming available to a popular audience. The enhanced accessibility of motion pictures and comic strips accelerated this process. The fact that the two media were tapping into the working class audience more effectively than any other previous mass medium alarmed a power bloc struggling to exert the same control over the conditions of leisure as it did over those of work. States and cities began establishing censorship boards for motion pictures in 1907, causing an uneven and often unpredictable market that hurt the commercial interests of an increasingly national industry. In 1908, the industry reacted with its own internal censorship board in an only marginally successful attempt to silence critics by controlling film content.

At the very heart of both the motion picture's and the comic strip's tremendous popular success was a fundamental reevaluation of the image, and it was this same factor that provoked the enraged objections of the self-proclaimed guardians of morals and good taste. As described above, the image had traditionally been cast as an inferior form of expression in Western culture. While it had been embraced by the disempowered, it had been feared by the ruling elite for its accessibility beyond institutional control. The consumer society

emerging in the nineteenth century had chosen the image as one of its favorite objects of purchase, establishing a durable link between mass communication and visualization. Nevertheless, certain traditional confines to the sphere of the image remained in effect in the United States. Having surfaced in seventeenth-century England, the expansion of narrative content across multiple juxtaposed panels had been largely unable to break into the American market.ⁱⁱⁱ Book illustration, on the other hand, enjoyed great popularity in the United States of the nineteenth century. While it permits the domain of the verbal and that of the pictorial sign to coexist side by side, book illustration ultimately bars the image from taking on integral narrative function. The word and the image are not permitted to converge and struggle for supremacy.

Then film and comic strip came along, freeing the image from its narrow confines and in effect ending the age-long hegemony of the word. Film is, in the words of Scott McCloud, “sequential in time,” while comics are “spatially juxtaposed” (7), that is, sequential in space. By popularizing sequential visual art, both film and comic strip made it clear that pictures are not transparent or “natural” signs with an intrinsic and necessarily limited meaning, but that they are, much like words, symbols able to convey abstract ideas and values; that they become signs only once we have invested them with meaning; that reading them requires sophistication beyond institutional control. Breaking with the traditional Western school of thought, the emerging media of film and comic strip demonstrated that the domains of narration and time, of history and discourse, of power and potential action, were not, as dominant ideology had claimed for centuries, restricted to the word alone, but that the image, a form of expression feared and repressed by the governing establishment over the centuries, had access to these domains as well.

From Comic Strip to Comic Book^{iv}

By the end of the nineteenth century, reading had emerged as one of America's most popular leisure activities. Publishing houses devoted to newspapers, books, and magazines had become major business enterprises. At the same time, the visualization of popular culture was reaching new heights with the emergence of film. Combining the vocabularies of both reading and film as its major communicating device, the comic strip created a "bastard child" – a hybrid made up of the word and the image as components of the same unit of information. The comic strip altered the dialectic of its previously separate codes, challenging the naïve hierarchy of linguistic and pictorial signs. It created a new language of fusion that required a unified vocabulary. This vocabulary was developed by various cartoonists over the years, and most of its components would later be adopted by the comic books.

Most newspaper-strip historians have identified Richard F. Outcault's *Hogan's Alley* as the medium's starting point, and indeed there can be no doubt that the strip's enormous popular success established the Sunday supplement as an integral component of the American Sunday newspaper. *Hogan's Alley* became a multimedia phenomenon, inspiring a Broadway musical among many other products over the years. This popular success was closely related to advancements in printing technique. Towards the end of 1895, William J. Kelly and Charles Saalburg developed a yellow tallow mixture suitable for the demands of newspaper printing, thereby paving the way for the use of color in the newspapers. This technical discovery was first applied in the Sunday supplement of the January 5, 1896 issue of the daily newspaper, *World*. Mickey Duggan, the main character from *Hogan's Alley*, was drawn in a yellow nightgown – a novelty that significantly contributed to the fame of the series and was responsible for the new name of its main character, "Yellow Kid".^v

Over the following years, the language of the comic strip took shape. Integrating dialogue into the image, the narrative device of the word balloon (or speech bubble) had been around in English broadsheets since the seventeenth and in American political cartoons since at least the eighteenth century. It was first adopted for the comic strip by Outcault's *Hogan's Alley*, then used consistently for the first time in Frederick Burr Opper's *Happy Hooligan*, launched in 1900. Various other components of the medium's graphical language were evolved on the pages of Rudolph Dirks' Sunday strip *The Katzenjammer Kids*, launched in 1897, where pain was first symbolized with small stars around the injured part of the body, fear with sweat drops on the forehead, and speed with lines behind the moving object. Despite such graphical innovations, most early Sunday strips remained limited in narrative scope. Slapstick comedy was the norm, and the typical plotline did not go beyond those narrative elements required to get the joke across.

When *The Bookman* ran an article on the new comic-strip phenomenon in 1902, it accordingly referred to the strips as "the new humor." This label was soon replaced by the term "the funnies," until "comics" and "comic strips" became widely accepted. All these terms clearly indicate an understanding of the medium as humorous by definition. But even during the comic strip's formative years, there were already exceptions to the rule. C.W. Kahles started blending elements of humor with elements of adventure in *The Perils of Submarine Boating* as early as 1901. From 1905 on, Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* broke the conventions of humorous caricature and slapstick by introducing art nouveau-influenced designs and unorthodox page layouts in order to create surreal dream worlds. Launched in 1906, C.W. Kahles' *Hairbreadth Harry* pioneered the cliffhanger's to-be-continued principle, opening up new narrative and compositional possibilities. Nevertheless, even when the adventure genre came to dominate the medium of newspaper strips in the 1930s, the term "comic" stuck. Regardless of content, it is still

widely applied to “comic strips” as well as “comic books,” however inappropriate those labels might be.

Comic strips had sporadically appeared in the daily editions of newspapers since 1896, but it was not until Harry Conway Fisher’s *A. Mutt* was launched on November 15, 1907 that the daily newspaper strip was firmly established as a component of Americana. Fisher’s strip appeared daily in the sports section of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, humorously discussing upcoming horse races. As other newspapers started including comic strips in their daily editions as well, the confines of the sports section were left behind. The new daily format made it easier for readers to follow continuing storylines, and the cliffhanger Kahles had pioneered for the Sunday supplement now became the norm for the daily comic strip. A genre well-suited to take advantage of this development was that of the family saga. Weaving together the increasingly complex everyday experiences of middle- or upper-class family members over weeks and months, strips like *Polly and her Pals* (launched in 1912), *Bringing up Father* (1913), and *The Gumps* (1917) started dominating the comic-strip landscape. Formally, the family saga’s extended plotlines moved the comic strip closer to the not yet invented comic-book narrative. The individual strips remained temporally and spatially separated from each other, to be sure, but the coherence of content connected the individual strips to each other, creating an extended narrative unit in the reader’s mind.

With the stock market crash of October 29, 1929, America plunged into the Great Depression. Amidst headlines describing mass unemployment, poverty, and criminality, newspaper readers of the Depression years were looking for a more fanciful world to escape to, one in which heroes were able to meet even the most terrifying challenges. They found this world in the comic strips, where the trend towards sustained narratives benefited the rise of a genre that was a perfect fit for the times and would soon become

constitutive to the comic-book medium: adventure. Roy Crane's *Wash Tubbs* started in 1924 as a humorous strip, but from 1929 on lead character Wash was faced with more demanding challenges mirroring the economic hardships of the time. Overwhelmed on his own, Wash was provided with much-needed support in the form of a new character called Captain Easy, an extraordinarily powerful and heroic figure able to guide Wash through what had become a challenging and dangerous world. From 1933 on, the popular Captain Easy starred in his own Sunday strip, a strip notable not only for being a major influence on the superhero concept but also for adding so-called sound words – words such as “bam!,” “bang!,” “bing!,” “bong!,” “smack!,” “crash!,” “ark!,” “sput!,” “plop!,” “ratta-ta-tatta-tat-tat!” – to the language of the comic strip.^{vi}

By the time DC started producing original comic-book material in the mid-1930s, the language of the comic strip as we still know it today had largely been established. Developed for the medium of newspaper strips, the components of this language could easily be adopted for the comic-book medium. Despite their spatial limitations, comic strips had even already successfully moved into the very genre that would become constitutive for the comic-book medium – the adventure genre. For the comic book to come into its own, though, two more steps were needed, and it would be several years before the comic-book industry was able to take them. First, page composition and storytelling rhythm had to be adjusted to make use of comic books' increased space for extended narration. Second, the comic-book industry had to define its own target audience and shape its product accordingly. Unlike the creators of newspaper strips, those of comic books did not have to consider the tastes and values of newspaper readers. Comic books could be targeted more directly than comic strips at those primarily drawn to their visual language – young readers in particular. The ingredient that would prove irresistible to the young was, of course, the superhero.

The newspaper provided the comic strip with an instant mass audience, turning it into a hugely popular medium in its own right. In return, the comic strip's broad appeal helped the newspaper widen its readership and open it up to subordinate groups it previously had difficulty accessing, in particular, the immigrant populations of the big cities. According to a 1938 Gallup poll, about 70% of all adults were reading the strips regularly, and many children undoubtedly followed them as well (Spiegelman 1997: 9).

Popular pleasure, of course, is generally feared by the bourgeoisie for its disruptive potential. To make things worse in the eyes of the elite, comic strips represented a new kind of communication medium that dared fuse the previously separate codes of linguistic and pictorial signs, posing a potent threat to the power structures built upon the privileged position of the word. Much like that of the silent movies, the language of the early comic strips could be understood by the semi-literate, by people lacking formal education, by recent immigrants, and by children. Slapstick comedy predominated, a largely visual genre that rarely required the consumer to read every word attached to the images. Newspaper publishers were well aware of the strips' accessibility, integrating them into their product with the objective of gaining access to people who would not buy newspapers for their articles alone, people who felt neglected by and thus had little interest in the official culture of their time. As a result, early comic strips existed and developed on the margins of official culture, in a sphere less tightly controlled by the dominant value system's notions of proper behavior and good taste.

Most early comic-strip characters accordingly live on the margins of society. They wear clothes at odds with what was considered respectable at that time, behave in crude and unpolished ways, and speak broken English or slang. The lead character of Rudolph Dirk's *The Captain and the Kids*, for example, talks with a thick German accent: "Und I giff you fair varning – lay off der hokus-pokus oder I fly off der temper und quit fooling, you

hear!” (Blackbeard and Crain: 43). Micky Dugan, a.k.a. the Yellow Kid, is always dressed in a nightshirt and says things like: “Say! Me an de gote is hot scotch all rite. I bet dat de lady of de lake will be stuck on me...” (Outcault: February 7, 1897). He roams the streets of a tenement-house district together with a culturally and ethnically diverse group of socially disadvantaged yet lively and playful children, but even among them he is, in the words of his creator R.F. Outcault, “a ‘kid’ who does not seem to be wanted. He is the tail on the kite, so to speak; the one the larger boys are constantly trying to lose. But he hangs on” (146).

To the linguistically, culturally, and economically dispossessed, the simple fact that a fictional world removed from dominant notions of respectability, a world they could relate to, had been published in a newspaper for entertainment rather than denigration was a source of pleasure. Crucially, the portrayal of the social outsiders populating this fictional world – no matter how eccentric, misguided or ignorant they and their actions may be – is always marked by empathy as well as sympathy. In fact, the only characters usually portrayed in a less than sympathetic light are those of elevated economic, political, or legal status. The main character of Frederick Burr Opper’s *Happy Hooligan*, for example, is poor, uneducated, and lacking in social etiquette, yet kind-hearted and always helpful. He never loses his naïve faith in and respect for established authority, even though his good intentions are consistently met with cruelty and injustice on the part of selfish and ungrateful mayors, judges, dukes, kings, and other representatives of the power bloc. Police officers always side with the establishment, falsely referring to the Happy Hooligan as a “hardened criminal” (Lindenblatt 2008: 22) and a “menace to life and property” (27), unjustifiably abusing and arresting him over and over again.

An essential component of the early comic strips is their humorous tone, for it provides readers with the opportunity to laugh away the worries and hardships caused by their

dispossessed status, creating a sphere in which the social hierarchies are momentarily suspended. The strips' humor frequently targets fundamental components of bourgeois identity – economic wealth, law and order, maturity, family hierarchy, education, “good” manners and taste. The liberating effect of such humor created discomfort and even fear among the establishment, a fear that manifested itself between the lines of an article written by Ralph Bergengren and published in the August 1906 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Disparaging comic strips as “a thing of national shame and degradation,” Bergengren focused his criticism on what is at the very heart of the early strips' humor: blatant disrespect for everything constitutive to bourgeois identity, everything that the bourgeoisie has laid claim to in an attempt to dissociate itself from the proletariat:

“Respect for property, respect for parents, for law, for decency, for beauty, for kindness, for dignity, or for honor, are killed, without mercy... Lunacy could go no farther than this pandemonium of disguised coarseness and brutality...” (quoted in Hajdu: 11-12).

Terms like “lunacy,” “coarseness,” and “brutality” serve to malign the culture of subordinated groups that had snuck into the newspaper, a product previously the exclusive privilege of the linguistically literate. Critics took offense at the strips' language that had dared penetrate the sphere of linguistic literacy, as well as at their humor that the dominant value system of the time deemed lower-class in origin and “vulgar” in effect. An article published in the January 1909 *Ladies' Home Journal* reads:

“One thing is certain: we are permitting to go on under our very noses and in our own homes an extraordinary stupidity, and an influence for repulsive and often depraving vulgarity so colossal that it is rapidly taking on the dimensions of nothing short of a national crime against our children” (quoted in Hajdu: 12)

At a time when industrialization was only in its early stages, animosities against comic strips were further fueled by a still widespread distrust towards the very concept of leisure activity. Some cartoonists tried to allay distrust towards pure entertainment by dressing their strips up as moral lessons. The first or the last panel of Outcault's Sunday strip *Buster Brown*, for example, usually contained an establishment-friendly "resolution" signed by the main character. Moreover, Outcault frequently had Buster's dog announce an official morale of the story, purporting to accept the educational mandate the elite was attempting to force upon the medium. Even though this duplicitous marketing strategy only marginally succeeded in silencing the critics, it would later be emulated by the comic-book industry.

When public libraries refused to carry newspapers featuring comic strips, the managing editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, James Keeley, attempted to win over the culturally influential ethnic German population by hiring illustrators of German descent, most notably Lyonel Feininger. However, the rather static panel transitions of Feininger's *The Kin-der-Kids* seemed strangely out of place amidst the bustling action of other comic strips, and by early 1907 the series was cancelled after less than nine months. Other newspapers – for example, the *Boston Herald* in 1908 – discontinued their comic-strip supplements altogether under pressure from customers and business partners.

Criticism abated only when middle-class family members started replacing social outsiders and anarchists as the strips' most popular central characters during the 1910s, winning the medium increasing acceptance among the middle class. Early Sunday strips like *Hogan's Alley* or *The Katzenjammer Kids* sympathized with the struggles of the economically and culturally dispossessed, celebrating their mannerisms and eccentricities. The family saga, represented by strips such as *Bringing Up Father*, turned the spotlight

from the margins to the privileged centre of American society, promoting family values rather than childlike anarchy.

During the Great Depression, adventure strips continued the trend toward more conservative values. Adventure strips such as *Fu Manchu* – launched in April 1931 – explicitly demonized the very notion of the culturally Other that early comic strips had been sympathetic to:

“Imagine a man, tall, lean and cat-like, with long, strange magnetic eyes, the brow of Shakespeare and the face of Satan... Invest him with the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, with all the resources of science, and vast wealth – imagine that awful being, and you have Dr. Fu Manchu, that Yellow Peril incarnate in one man” (quoted in Goulart 1995: 106).

The science fiction strips of the 1930s removed Them even further from Us, locating the evil Other in distant space. Jack, hero of the daily strip *Jack Swift* (launched in 1930), for example, has no sympathy for alien forms of life and simply refers to them as “those freaks.” The hero of *Flash Gordon* (launched in 1934), a blond graduate of the prestigious Yale University and world-famous polo player, steadfastly fights Ming the Merciless, malevolent ruler of the planet Mongo. By the late 1930s and the rise of the comic book, then, the comic-strip medium had long renounced most of its subversive potential.

The newspaper not only provided the new medium of comic strips with an instant mass audience, it also shaped its narrative content. Typically read at the breakfast table, on the bus or train, or wherever the daily routine allowed for a little break, newspaper content – both articles and comic strips – had to be limited in narrative scope so as not to overstrain the reader. Moreover, all newspaper strips had to be at least in part targeted at adults. To be sure, many strips were read also or even predominantly by adolescents and

preadolescents who found their accessible visual language appealing. However, the vast majority of newspapers were purchased by adults, and adult tastes and values consequently had to be taken into consideration by the publishers and the creators. Comic strips that offended adult sensibilities, after all, could have caused potential customers to reject the newspaper they were published in. For comics to take full advantage of both their narrative potential and their popular appeal to the young, they needed to be removed from the constraints of the newspaper medium.

In March 1897, comic strips for the first time appeared outside a newspaper when a book titled *The Yellow Kid in McFadden's Flats* and a magazine named *Yellow Kid Magazine* were published, both reprinting *Hogan's Alley* strips that had previously appeared in newspapers. As the reproduction of Sunday strips into collections started gaining ground at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was initially the bound book format that prevailed over the cheaper magazine format. In the course of the first decade of the twentieth century, more than seventy bound anthologies of Sunday strips such as *Buster Brown*, *The Katzenjammer Kids* or *Happy Hooligan* were sold in bookstores, sporadically also at newsstands. Published in 1907, a book titled *A. Mutt*, after the strips it collected, was the first to reprint dailies rather than Sundays.

In January 1922, Embee Distributing Co. put out the first issue of *Comic Monthly*, introducing the serialized magazine format to comic-strip publication. Each issue of *Comic Monthly* collected recent newspaper strips of a different series on twenty-four newsprint pages. *Comic Monthly* #1, for example, was devoted to *Polly and Her Pals*. In addition to being the first comic-strip compilation published at regular intervals, *Comic Monthly* was also a first attempt at selling comic-strip reprints exclusively through newsstands. Both monthly format and newsstand distribution anticipated the marketing strategies of a comic-book industry that would become hugely profitable from the late 1930s on, yet

Comic Monthly met with little commercial success and was cancelled after only twelve issues. The first publication consisting of original comic strips rather than newspaper reprints was 1929's tabloid-sized *The Funnies* #1. The publisher's decision to collect previously unpublished strips can hardly be described as innovative, though, for neither the form nor the content of these strips differed significantly from standard comic-strip material. In all likelihood, they were chosen simply because they had previously been rejected by the major syndicates and could thus be purchased at a lower price. *The Funnies* came out in weekly intervals until the series was cancelled after issue #36.

In 1933, a more efficient printing technique was developed by a struggling publisher looking for a way to keep the presses rolling, Eastern Color Printing. It used its existing tabloid-sized color presses to print four comic-book pages side by side, resulting in the comic book *Funnies on Parade*. Like most of its predecessors, it merely reprinted comic strips that had previously appeared in newspapers. The historical relevance of *Funnies on Parade* lies in its cost-saving production and in the eight-by-eleven-inch format that resulted from it, as both of these elements would be utilized by the comic-book industry. The low production costs enabled Eastern Color Printing to sell the title for a relatively low price, making it economically feasible for a soap manufacturer to buy ten thousand copies and make them available as free premiums for their customers. The entire print run was exhausted within weeks. By 1934, Eastern Color Printing started changing its distribution method, selling its latest newspaper-strip compilation – *Famous Funnies* – to newsstands rather than manufacturers. The decision eventually paid off and resulted in a successful two-hundred-eighteen-issue run of the series. It was not the content that set *Famous Funnies* apart from the competition during the early years of its run, but the fact that the title offered sixty-eight pages of colorful entertainment for only ten cents per copy at a time

when many Americans longed for a distraction from their economic hardships but could not afford more expensive forms of entertainment.

The so-called “Tijuana Bibles” are rarely mentioned when it comes to the early history of comic books. Researchers have denied the historical significance of these little three-by-four-inch booklets because, as Art Spiegelman puts it, they were “cheerfully pornographic and downright illegal” (1997: 5). Most “Tijuana Bibles” feature well-known comic-strip characters of their time – later ones also Hollywood stars and other celebrities^{vii} – who were shown to experience any possible kind of explicit sexual adventure.^{viii} Regardless of content, there can be no doubt that the “Tijuana Bibles” must be defined as comic books. Their narratives usually extend across eight black (or blue) and white pages, one panel per page.

Cheaply and illegally produced in the American underground, they found a popular audience from the late 1920s to the early 1960s when their relevance faded with the rise of pornographic magazines such as *Playboy*. At the height of their popularity during the 1930s, print runs are estimated to have ranged into the millions. Yet as a result of their legal status, very little information is available on their authorship, production, and distribution. Even the origin of the term “Tijuana Bibles” has not been determined beyond doubt, as they most probably were not produced in Tijuana and certainly were not Bibles. Spiegelman speculates:

“These books might have been called Tijuana Bibles as a gleefully sacrilegious pre-NAFTA slur against Mexicans, to throw G-men off the trail, or because the West Coast border towns were an important supplier of all sorts of sin” (6).

Founded in 1935, DC^{ix} was the first licensed publisher to follow the “Tijuana Bibles” example of producing all its comic-book material in-house rather than purchasing it from

newspaper syndicates. It was some time, though, before DC would take full advantage of the opportunities this decision presented. At a time when Eastern Color Printing's *Famous Funnies* had already established the marketability of the modern comic-book format, early issues of DC's first series, *New Fun Comics* (later re-titled *More Fun Comics*), were still printed in the tabloid-sized format. What is more, the stories contained in these early issues were still limited in narrative scope and closely resembled newspaper strips. Only gradually would the comic-book medium leave behind the spatial limitations of its precursor; only gradually would it take advantage of the fact that the experience of reading comic books was not tied to that of reading newspapers, and that the narrative scope of comic books could thus be permitted to exceed the receptiveness of the typical newspaper reader. As the comic-book page became a building block contributing to a larger whole, the grammar of comic books – their layout and pacing in particular – was gradually adjusted to the extended narration.

In conclusion, the comic book's emancipation from the comic strip was a gradual process. The *Yellow Kid Magazine* and the book *The Yellow Kid in McFadden's Flats* were the first publications to remove comic strips from the newspaper. *Comic Monthly* was the first comic-strip collection to come out periodically, establishing the newsstand as the main outlet for comic books. *The Funnies* was the first series to collect material that had not previously been published in newspapers. *Funnies on Parade* established more efficient production methods, resulting in the modern comic-book format. The "Tijuana Bibles" were the first comic books to be produced independently from newspaper syndicates, *New Fun Comics* their first licensed successor.

The market for the new medium of comic books, however, still needed to be developed. With the exception of *Famous Funnies* and the "Tijuana Bibles," none of the above mentioned titles was a commercial success. While the economic hardships of the Depression

Era formed an obstacle difficult to overcome, a side glance at other media reveals that images were irresistibly conquering the American market. By the 1930s, film and photograph had changed the very nature of mass communication. Newsreels were offering new ways of absorbing current events on a primarily visual level. The weekly news magazine *Life*, launched in 1936, focused on photojournalism and started popularizing the “picture essay.” The embryonic comic-book industry tried hard to seize the opportunity and establish the new medium in the newsstand market. Six publishers produced at least eighty-one comic books in 1936, and roughly twice as many in 1937 (Benton 1993a: 20).

With a place on the newsstands, and the capability to reach a new audience, the comic-book medium could begin to look for popular success through the creation of original material – most notably, the superhero.

ⁱ For this chapter, the following comic-strip reprint anthologies were used: Adelman, B. 1997; Blackbeard, B. (ed.) 1994; Blackbeard, B. and Crain, D. (eds) 1995; Falk, L. and Moore, R. 2010; Foster, H. 1993; King, F. O. 2005; Lindenblatt, J. (ed.) 2008, 2009; McCay, W. 2000; Norwood, R. (ed.) 2010; Outcault, R. F. 1995; Segar, E. C. 2006.

ⁱⁱ According to an estimate by French historians Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, “about twenty million books were printed before 1500” (quoted in Stephens: 29).

ⁱⁱⁱ One of very few exceptions to the rule is a picture story by Swiss part-time cartoonist Rodolphe Töpffer that was translated for the American market and published in 1842 as *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*.

^{iv} For this section, the following comic-strip reprint anthologies were used: Adelman, B. 1997; Blackbeard, B. (ed.) 1994; Blackbeard, B. and Crain, D. (eds) 1995.

^v In recent years, research literature on comics has disputed May 5, 1895 – the day *Hogan’s Alley* first appeared in the World – as the birthdate of the newspaper strip. Knigge (1996: 7) and Goulart (1995: 3-4) both point out that Outcault’s early contributions were merely single panel cartoons, and they should not yet be defined as comic strips that by definition consist of at least two juxtaposed and thematically related panels. It was not until October 25, 1896 that Outcault replaced the single-panel format with a sequence of panels. In contrast, Mark Fenderson’s “On the Tramp: A Song Without Words,” which appeared in *Sunday World* already on January 28, 1894, was a sequence of panels thematically connected to each other. Furthermore,

Outcault himself had already published a graphic narrative without text that unfolded in six panels and carried the apt title “Origin of a New Species” in the November 18, 1894 edition of the *Sunday World*.

^{vi} Andreas Knigge argues that the popular advance of sound in films since 1927 was likely a stimulus for the introduction of sound words in the comic strip (1996: 57).

^{vii} The “Tijuana Bibles” playful and often ironic attitude towards current fictitious characters and real-life celebrities would turn out to be a major influence on EC’s *Mad* during the 1950s, and *Mad / Mad Magazine* would in turn have a great impact on the underground cartoonists of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In addition, the rebellious sexual frankness, finding joy and excitement in challenging the moral conventions of its time, directly links the undergrounds to the “Tijuana Bibles.” By showing precisely what could not be shown in the mass media, they both rebel against an increasingly commercialized society that allows its popular culture and advertisement to manipulate and stimulate, but never to satisfy.

^{viii} While stereotypical characterization was the standard in all forms of popular culture of the 1930s to ’50s (Merkin: 44) and in many cases beyond, the “Tijuana Bibles” tendency to underline gender and ethnic differences with gross distortion was even more prominent than that of other popular media. Art Spiegelman explains:

“Pornography and cartoons are both about the stripping-away of dignity; both depend on exaggeration; and both deploy what Susan Sontag, in *The Pornographic Imagination*, calls ‘a theater of types, never individuals’” (1997: 8).

Spiegelman also points out that the stereotypical portrayals in the “Tijuana Bibles” do not deliver an overtly political message, as they “demean *everyone*, regardless of gender, ethnic origin, [social status,] or even species” (9). Still, the portrayal of all women as constantly horny to the point of insatiability is the most consistent one in the “Tijuana Bibles,” and it is certainly related to the fact that these booklets were primarily intended to stimulate the sexual fantasies of men. Gender roles were rapidly changing at the time. American women had won the right to vote in 1920, and this new law – the nineteenth Amendment – both reflected and promoted an increased social status for women. During the “roaring” 1920s, American women started gaining a moderate degree of economic independence, as they were increasingly likely to be gainfully employed. In 1933 the first female Senator, Hattie Caraway, was elected to represent the State of Arkansas. Many men had a hard time adjusting to such developments, and the “Tijuana Bibles” central fantasy of women in desperate need of male power and dominance illustrates a regressive male longing for the much more dependent woman of the past.

^{ix} In order to avoid confusion I only use the name DC, but it should be pointed out that the publishing house originally started out as three separate companies – National Allied Publications, founded by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson; Detective Comics, Inc., founded by Harry Donenfeld and J.S. Liebowitz; and All-American Publications, founded by M.C. Gaines. Detective Comics, Inc. and National Allied Publications formed a partnership in 1936, and Donenfeld and Liebowitz bought Wheeler-Nicholson out. The resulting company was officially named National Comics (later National Periodical Publications), but its logo always

used “DC” which stood for “Detective Comics.” All-American Publications remained a separate company, but published its comics under the same logo until 1944. After a brief separation, Gaines sold most of his titles to DC, founding a new company called EC Comics.

Chapter 2

The Rise of the Comic-Book Market: Production and Consumptionⁱ

Up to 1938, the primary role of the comic-book format was collecting reprinted newspaper strips. Publishing houses at first shied away from creating original material, mainly because they lacked the necessary production know-how. In 1936, studios specializing in the creation of original comic-book material started to fill that gap, producing and packaging complete comic books for the publishers. By the late 1930s four major “shops,” as these studios became known, shared the market, joined by various smaller ones during the early 1940s.

One of the four major shops was called Universal Phoenix, formed by Will Eisner and Jerry Iger in 1937. Eisner, whose unique involvement in both the creative and the business side of early comic books makes him the most versatile source of information on the medium’s beginnings, notes that comic-book studios “were like factories in those days” (Schutz and Kitchen: 208). In order to produce as cheaply and quickly as possible, the shops adopted the assembly-line production methods that had revolutionized mass production since their invention by Henry Ford in 1914. In Eisner’s shop, for example, staff artists sat by a row of drawing boards in a big, barn-like room. Eisner himself would rough out the layout for a story, then a staff writer would take over and fill in the dialogue, then another would finish the roughs, then others again would add backgrounds, ink the pencils, and do the coloring. Throughout the process, Eisner would keep an eye on the developments and occasionally demand changes. In the end, the pencils would be erased and the page cleaned. Clearly, then, the shops’ finished products were the result of a group effort.

The shops created demand for comic-book artists, but original comic-book art was still a novelty and few artists had yet specialized in the new medium. Most shop artists were recruited from the related fields of fine arts and book or magazine illustration. Schooled in basic drawing composition and anatomy, they could usually create competent individual illustrations, but they still had to develop a sense for sequential storytelling. As a result, early comic-book art often had a static feel to it, lacking dynamic panel transition and thoughtful page composition. The shared production process could be beneficial to artists unfamiliar with the new medium, as Eisner points out: “Our shop was almost like a school. We really worked together. My style was picked up. We all sort of developed as we worked” (Schutz and Kitchen: 326).

Artistic enrichment was a welcome side-effect, to be sure, but prosaic economic considerations must be identified as the main reason for the shops’ assembly-line production methods. Comic-book distribution was tied to the American News company, a distribution system that comic-book publishers had inherited from pulp publishers. Like newspapers and pulp magazines, comic books were sold at newsstands. The distributor, used to dealing with newspapers, would only handle comic books that had a print run of at least three hundred thousand, a situation that effectively gave control over comic-book distribution to publishers with the resources to produce such high print runs. The risk involved in comic-book publication was further raised by the distributor’s contractual right to return any unsold copies for a full refund, making independent publication without considerable financial resources close to impossible. Those major publishing houses able to deal in comic books were trying to minimize their risk by keeping production costs low and sticking to proven formulas. The shops created the cheap and formulaic material publishing houses were looking for. Keeping costs low while allowing little room for creative freedom, factory production methods fit the bill.

Staff artists were forced to accept harsh working conditions during the Depression years, as an oversupply of young workers in relation to the available jobs weakened their bargaining position. Cartoonist Joe Kubert, who used to draw in one of the four major shops, at the time commonly known as “sweat shops” among creators, remembers the working environment like this:

“The elevator was so rickety that none of the guys would take a chance riding the thing, and instead, they walked up three or four flights of stairs. The wooden floors creaked. There was dust everywhere from the cracks in the wood as you walked... As for air conditioning, forget it. It was hot as hell in the place” (quoted in Harvey 1996: 17).

Staff artists were usually paid on a per-page basis that clearly valued quantity over quality. Income could be increased only by producing pages faster and with less care for detail, an arrangement often contributing to a cynical attitude among creators towards their own work. Joe Simon looks back:

“You know, we all had the same trick. Put in one panel with detail in it, and then have an explosion taking up two or three panels – just a ball of fire or something, and leave it open for color. The pages went very quickly! [laughter]” (Schutz and Kitchen: 330).

Most staff artists saw comic books as a mere stepping-stone to the financially more lucrative and socially more prestigious areas of newspaper strips, advertisement, magazine or book illustration. As soon as the chance arose, they left the comic-book business behind for greener pastures.

While the economic conditions of the Great Depression magnified the creators’ dependency on their employers, mass-production of popular culture generally and at any time forms

creators dependent on a dominant to deliver the necessary resources. It comes as no surprise, then, that the assembly-line production process did not disappear with the end of the Great Depression. Division of labor and specialization became widely accepted as unchangeable cogs in the wheel of comic-book production.

When an increasing number of publishers started producing their own comic books in-house during the 1940s, they adopted the shops' assembly-line working methods. Major publishing houses were beginning to make huge profits in the early 1940s but staff artists were still treated the way they were during the Great Depression. Creating artwork, whether in a shop or in a publishing house, was still a largely anonymous affair. Very few artists received credit for their work and had an identity among readers. Both shop owners and publishers preferred this anonymity, because it made the artists replaceable and kept them from building a better negotiating position. Even many of the staff artists themselves preferred to work anonymously, for they had no ambition to make a name for themselves in a comic-book industry that paid the lowest wages in the field of commercial art while denying its creators any kind of artistic self-realization. Being publicly associated with the "artistic ghetto" of comic books might have damaged their professional reputation, and thus the opportunity to succeed in other fields.

Assembly-line comic-book production was unlikely to create innovative results, because the process is, by its very nature, unable to express any kind of distinctive vision. It is no coincidence, then, that the one outstanding comic-book character that almost single-handedly turned a struggling industry into a hugely successful enterprise was created by two industry outsiders, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Siegel himself claims to have dreamt up a raw version of Superman as a teenager one night in 1933:

"I am lying in bed counting sheep when all of a sudden it hits me. I conceive a character like Sampson, Hercules, and all the strong men I

ever heard tell of rolled into one. Only more so. I hop right out of bed and write this down, and then I go back and think some more for about two hours and get up again and write that down. This goes on all night at two-hour intervals, until in the morning I have a complete script” (quoted in Kurtzman 1991: 14).

Writer Siegel and artist Shuster originally submitted Superman comic strips to newspaper syndicates, but their submissions were repeatedly rejected. This may at first glance seem surprising considering the future commercial success of the Superman comic books, but it becomes understandable when viewed in context of the newspapers’ readership. While newspapers and their comic strips were largely targeted at adult readers, the Superman narrative, it will be argued below, would primarily appeal to a significantly younger audience, the kind of audience DC publisher Harry Donenfeld intended to tap with his original comic-book material.

In early 1938, Donenfeld decided to give the Superman character a try. He had the panels of the strips rearranged to comic-book proportions, and published a thirteen-page Superman story in the premier issue of the anthology title *Action Comics*, cover-dated June 1938. The print run was small at first, but the fourth issue of the series sold out and the seventh issue already sold over half a million copies. All of a sudden, comic books were big business. Newsstand surveys revealed “Superman” to be the title’s most popular feature, and in 1939 the hero got his own *Superman* series in addition to his spot in *Action Comics*. *Superman* grossed an unheard-of \$950,000 in 1940. Its protagonist, the single most influential character in the history of comic books, turned his publishing house DC Comics into the most successful comic-book publisher in the United States.

From the start, comic books and their characters had been corporately owned. Publishers had taken advantage of the Depression era’s tight labor market, and even long after the end

of the Great Depression their standard contracts reserved for themselves the right to take a comic-book feature away from its creators and hand it over to other artists whenever they decided to do so. When entering their business relationship with DC, Superman creators Siegel and Shuster signed the standard release form customary in their trade, giving sole copyright ownership of their creation to the company.ⁱⁱ They initially received ten dollars per page from DC, an amount that was raised to thirty-five dollars per page – the highest rate paid in the industry at the time – once Superman had become the industry’s first “star” and was earning the publisher millions of dollars. In addition, the creators received five percent of all other revenue earned from their creation, resulting in a total of about eight hundred dollars a week for each creator (Wright: 7-15). This amount was reasonable when compared to the earnings of other comic-book creators of the period, but it was ridiculously small when compared to the profits DC was making from its most popular character.

To make things worse, the commercial success of the Superman line meant that by the early 1940s the character’s original creators were unable to cope with the growing demand for new material. Assistants were hired, many of them technically more capable than Siegel and Shuster who were losing control of their creation. The story “The Invention Thief” from 1942’s *Superman* #14, written by Jerry Siegel and already illustrated by one of Joe Shuster’s successors, Leo Nowak, gives allegorical expression to this situation. The narrator’s introduction reads:

“Most of the comforts and necessities of modern-day civilization were originated by young, ‘impractical’ dreamers... But often the fruits of their labors were annexed by unscrupulous schemers. Superman comes up against such a situation – and deals out super-justice as only the Man of Tomorrow can!”

The plot has it that an invention earns great riches for a company, while the young inventor himself goes away empty-handed. When the inventor complains about being fobbed off with fifty dollars, the president of the company replies: “Not so fast, youngster – you’re speaking to the man who owns that discovery! ...When you accepted that ‘advance’ and signed this paper, you forfeited all rights to your discovery.” The inventor is appalled (“But – but that’s not fair!”), but the company’s president fortifies his position with a threat: “Be a good lad and maybe you’ll make some money out of this. But any time you raise a kick you’ll be out!” Having observed these developments (“There goes Chet – beaten – discouraged! Poor kid! He didn’t realize the type of obstacles that lie in the path of a young inventor!”), Superman serves justice by punishing the company’s president (“You’ve gypped [the young inventor] out of the fruits of his discovery – there’s no reason for me to handle you gently”) and by forcing him to “write a complete release of all rights to [the inventor]” (Siegel *et al.* 1994: 81-92).

Unfortunately for Siegel and Shuster, Superman did not come to the creators’ aid in the real world. When DC refused to sign a release of the rights to the Superman character, Siegel and Shuster decided to bring the publisher to court in 1947, asking to have their contract with the publishing house annulled and seeking a declaration of their rights to Superman. The New York Supreme Court, however, upheld the original agreement between the creators and DC, confirming DC as the absolute copyright owner of the character.

DC began exploiting the successful superhero formula in May 1939 with the publication of a “Batman” feature, created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger, in the pages of *Detective Comics*. During the second half of the year many other publishing houses jumped onto the superhero bandwagon, contributing to a total of over fifty comic-book titles published in 1939. By 1940, more than thirty publishers lifted the number of titles to about 150, generating an annual revenue of over twenty million dollars and establishing the medium

as a permanent part of Americana. During the same year, for the first time the market share of the dominating superhero genre surpassed that of comic-strip reprint collections. Despite increasing competition, DC remained the market leader in 1940, as its nationally distributed titles sold an average of 800,000 copies per issue. During the following war years, shortages of labor and paper slowed down the industry's overall growth, but did not halt it. By the beginning of 1942, comic books had found over fifty million readers each month. In 1943, approximately twenty-five million comic books were sold per month, earning the industry thirty million dollars in the course of the year. The superhero genre reached its all-time peak circulation in 1944. Fawcett's *Captain Marvel Adventures* alone sold over fourteen million copies over the course of that year, about 20% more than the previous or succeeding year (Benton 1993b: 27-32; Pustz: 27; Wright: 14).

The competition became rougher as a growing number of publishers struggled for the limited display area newsstands were willing to grant comic books. In September 1941, DC filed a lawsuit against Fawcett, charging infringement and unfair competition. Historians today generally agree that this lawsuit was primarily motivated by the fact that Captain Marvel was turning Fawcett into a serious competitor that was threatening DC's position as market leader.ⁱⁱⁱ There were indeed similarities between Superman and Captain Marvel, but then, there were striking similarities between *all* the pre-war superheroes. Yes, both Clark Kent and Billy Batson (a.k.a. Captain Marvel) work for the news media, but so does Alan Scott, alter ego of DC's own Green Lantern. Yes, both Billy and Clark are orphans, but so is DC's Bruce Wayne (a.k.a. the Batman). And yes, both Superman and Captain Marvel like to give opponents "a dose of their own medicine," but so do almost all the other superheroes of the pre-war years. All superheroes were modeled after Superman.

An irony of the lawsuit lies in the probability that it was precisely the ways in which the Captain Marvel comics *differed* from the Superman titles that contributed significantly to

their commercial success, and thus to DC's decision to file the lawsuit. While the concept for Captain Marvel was similar to that for Superman and other pre-war superheroes in some regards, the Captain Marvel titles had a more status-quo-friendly attitude, one that would come to dominate the genre from late 1941 on. The Captain Marvel line was also innovative in its less grim, more playful and humorous tone that would eventually be adopted by most superhero titles in the 1950s and especially in the 1960s. To summarize, DC claimed plagiarism at a time when the whole industry was built on a single character and thus on plagiarism, and when the secret of Fawcett's outstanding success was, to a large extent, based on the innovative new spin its titles put on the established genre. After all, the newsstands of 1940 and 1941 were full of Superman-imitations, but none of them achieved the commercial success of Captain Marvel.

At around the time DC went to court, the Superman titles were already starting to follow Captain Marvel's lead, first adopting a more conservative ideology, later a playful and occasionally humorous tone. The court at first decided in favor of Fawcett Publications, but later reversed this ruling when DC appealed and was granted a new trial. Fawcett, having spent large amounts on legal fees, decided to abandon further defense in the early 1950s. An out-of-court settlement was reached, which resulted in Fawcett's ceasing publication of the Captain Marvel line in 1953. By this time, the Superman titles and the Captain Marvel books were very similar indeed, because DC had been adjusting its books to Fawcett's formula for years. In an attempt to further these similarities, DC in the mid-1950s did not even shy away from handing over its Superman line to Otto Binder, the very creator who had more than anyone shaped the saga of Captain Marvel and his family for twelve years until the line's cancellation. After writing more than half of all the comics of the Captain Marvel line, close to one thousand stories, he would – to great popular success – provide

DC's most famous hero with a "Super Family" modeled closely after the "Marvel Family" he had been forced to leave behind by his new employer.

When the paper-rationing program was lifted by the government after the war, the comic-book industry seized the opportunity to resume its delayed growth. In 1946, approximately forty million comic books were published every month, more than ever before. While the superhero genre was still performing well, it was starting to lose ground. Other genres were capturing a growing market share. The following year, circulation figures on most superhero titles started to drop considerably, even though the industry as a whole continued its growth. By the decade's end, the superhero genre had lost its dominant position. Despite falling sales numbers for superhero comic books, the size of the comic-book industry doubled between 1946 and 1949. In 1949 alone, more than three hundred titles were published (Benton 1993b: 45-46).

Almost everybody had access to comic books, as they were sold for only a dime each at ubiquitous newsstands and candy stores. Providing visual entertainment before television would become a standard fixture in American households in the 1950s, comic books represented a cheap alternative to the movie theater, one that was affordable even to children. When the superhero genre proved to have enormous commercial potential, publishers began focusing on the age group this particular genre was most popular with: preadolescents and adolescents. While conventional superhero comics mostly appealed to young boys, so-called teen comics like *Archie* along with superhero books starring female heroines like Wonder Woman increased the percentage of female comic-book readers. A survey done by the Market Research Company of America and published in *Newsweek* on 27 December, 1943 revealed that ninety-five percent of all Americans aged eight to eleven, eighty-four percent of those aged twelve to seventeen, and thirty-five percent of those aged eighteen to thirty were regular comic-book readers (Pustz: 27). In addition, hundreds of

thousands of comic books were shipped to American soldiers around the world, offering a quick and relatively undemanding distraction during the first half of the decade.

Even though the average comic-book reader was becoming slightly older as the superhero genre began losing its popular appeal during the second half of the 1940s, preadolescent and adolescent readers would remain the medium's core audience throughout the decade. Jack Burnley recalls that editors at DC were very aware of their readers' tender age and limited attention span, instructing the writers of their superhero titles "never [to] go more than the first three panels without some action" (7). This marketing strategy not only restricted the subject matter and level of sophistication publishers were instructing their employees to deliver, but also contributed to the dominant value system's denigration of the medium. Will Eisner remembers the widespread deprecatory attitude towards comic books:

"In 1940 I gave an interview with the *Baltimore Sun* when 'The Spirit' first came out, and I said, 'This is a literary art form.' And the guys were laughing at me and said, 'What are you trying to prove, Will, who do you think you are?' [Newspaper cartoonist] Rube Goldberg told me what I was saying was bullshit. He said, 'Shit, boy, you're a vaudevillian. Don't forget this is vaudeville'" (Schutz and Brownstein: 163).

At the time, products aimed directly at children and adolescents were a novelty scorned by the cultural elite. All comic books, even the rare ones targeting an older audience like *The Spirit Section*, were equated with what has become known as youth culture. As such, they were considered not only an unseemly affront against the hierarchies of taste, but an impudent challenge of the taken-for-granted adult right to control the leisure activities of the young. Until comic books came along, after all, products eventually meant to entertain the young had been targeted to a large extent at adults, because parents had been the ones buying them. American culture, in other words, had been forged by and for adults.

Youth culture first emerged as a widespread social phenomenon in the urban United States of the “roaring” 1920s, when an expansion in higher education^{iv} gave rise to a “campus culture.” Many aspects of this youth culture — the “dance craze,” the practice of dating, movie attendance in the company of peers, slightly more revealing fashion ideals for women — reflected changes in sexual norms. The celebration of the values of leisure and hedonism, as well as the new emphasis on self-presentation, marked a clear departure from the Puritan ideals of self-control and self-denial. As the 1920s were a time of relative economic prosperity in the U.S., with domestic product rising by nearly forty percent from 1922 to 1929, the youth-culture pursuit of pleasure and focus on “aura” found expression in patterns of consumption. Clothing, toilet goods, and cigarettes were among the most popular products of the evolving youth market, and an aspect they all had in common was their link to sexual expressiveness. While these products started to be specifically *marketed* towards young consumers through advertisement and “youth-pricing,” it is important to note that the products themselves were identical or at least quite similar to those purchased by adults.

During the 1930s, the slightly younger high-school students gained influence as an increasingly self-confident and independent social group. Pushed out of the work sphere by Depression-era unemployment, they learned to look to one another and not to adults for information and advice, developing a generational consciousness and in the process revolutionizing the very concept of growing up. Notions of teenage rights and of a more democratic family life began to take off. By 1936, sixty-five percent of all American teenagers were high-school students, the highest proportion to date. By 1938, adolescents were making a name for themselves as “bobby soxers” — fun-loving and swing-crazed, yet neither hostile nor rebellious. By 1940, half the nation’s seventeen-year-olds were high school graduates, almost twice as many as a decade earlier (Palladino: 5-51).

Children's literature had emerged as a distinct publishing field during the 1920s, but it was still targeted to a large extent at parents and thus presented as educational or otherwise beneficial to the child's mental well-being. Swing music had been shaping teenage style since 1937, but it was still primarily aimed at adult consumers and thus did not reflect any kind of independent adolescent or even preadolescent perspective. It was not until the publication of *Action Comics* #1 in 1938 that the market started developing products targeted specifically at the increasingly independent youth demographic. At ten cents each, mass-produced comic books were inexpensive enough to be afforded by most adolescents and children, offering an easily accessible alternative to entertainment sanctioned by adult authority. The popular market would never be the same. The commercial success of the superhero comic books established that products could be targeted directly at children and adolescents, and that the production of a purely youth-culture commodity could be very profitable. For the first time, children were provided with popular pleasures beyond the control of their parents. The new marketing strategy of bypassing parents allowed producers to drop any pretense of educational value and focus on pure entertainment value instead. As a result, the superhero comic books gave expression to the desires, pleasures, and fears of adolescents and preadolescents, a demographic previously neglected by the popular market.

Many adults, however, were not pleased with this development. Ever since the publication of G. Stanley Hall's highly influential textbook *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* initiated the study of adolescence as a distinct field of scholarship in 1904, the notion that adults had the right, even the social obligation to tightly control the leisure activities of adolescents had been widely promoted by psychologists and educators. To be sure, Hall's claim that a tendency toward "storm and stress," that is, toward considerable upheaval and disruption

in adolescence is biological, universal, and thus inevitable, had been disproven by anthropologist Margaret Mead as early as 1928. Yet Hall's theories proved persistent in the adult mind.

By the late 1930s, adolescents were still widely regarded as vulnerable victims of raging hormones in need of adult guidance and protection. This assessment, after all, conveniently justified tight adult control over adolescent behavior while drawing the curtain over possible adult responsibility for adolescent problems and rebellion, particularly in the areas of parenting and schooling. Not surprisingly, then, many adults perceived the existence of superhero comics as an intolerable form of cultural insubordination threatening not only vulnerable adolescent and even preadolescent minds, but also the traditional family hierarchy.

To make things worse in the minds of concerned parents, the “cool medium” of comics supplies information of low definition, obliging the young reader — presumed unequipped to rise to the occasion by many adults — to participate in creating meaning by actively filling in the gaps and completing the message.^v Traditionally, however, it had been considered a characteristic of “serious” and “valuable” cultural events that the audience, in the words of Umberto Eco, “must not participate,” that “people keep quiet (and, it is hoped, are bored)” (152).

Moreover, the visual aspect of the narrative medium created a grammar different from that of conventional literature, a grammar more accessible to children still lacking the linguistic competence of adults. As can be expected, children were attracted to this new kind of grammar. At an age when reading conventional literature still required considerable effort, they could already easily and quickly follow the narrative of a comic book. As a result, the dividing line between literacy and illiteracy was blurred. Literacy in a traditional sense depends on adult-controlled education, already largely institutionalized by the early 1940s.

Comic-book literacy, in contrast, undermines adult authority as it heavily relies on a visual grammar children quickly learn without adult guidance. Not surprisingly, many adults rejected this visual grammar. Viewing the medium's low production values with suspicion, they perceived comic books as an inferior form of conventional literature and thus as a threat to the hierarchies of taste, the children's growing independence and confidence as alarming evidence of a diminishing respect for authority and a menace to the balance of social power. A generational conflict emerged that has remained a concomitant of youth-culture phenomena ever since, finding expression, for example, in the ambivalent to hostile perception of rock 'n' roll music during the 1950s and of videogames more recently.

By directly targeting children and adolescents, the comic-book medium positioned itself outside the adult-sanctioned and institutionally legitimated "official culture," a marketing strategy that, while commercially successful, secured the medium a spot at the very bottom of the cultural hierarchy. Earlier in the century, this spot had belonged to the media that first popularized sequential visual art, comic strip and film. The low price of newspapers, as well as the low entrance fees at first to vaudeville shows and later to nickelodeons, attracted a mass audience that, due to the accessibility of the image, included children and recent immigrants still unable to understand the English language. Offering an alternative to institutionalized forms of communication, comic strip and motion picture were perceived as a threat and accordingly shunned by elitists. By the late 1930s, though, most self-proclaimed guardians of established values and "good taste" had been appeased by both the newspaper syndicates' and Hollywood's efforts to turn their products into "respectable" commodities.^{vi} As comic strip and film were outgrowing their roles of cultural outlaws, the comic-book industry stepped in – a financially lucrative move that ruined the new medium's reputation among the cultural elite for decades to come.

The emergence of youth culture in the United States coincided with a growing dissatisfaction among adults regarding the consequences of their country's advance into the machine age. Essential traditional concepts like the integrity of the individual, personal liberty, and opportunity were perceived by a growing number of Americans as threatened if not outmoded in the new industrial world of mass production, mass consumption, and mass communication. By 1930, magazines, journals, books, and newspapers were involved in a critical debate over popular culture and its social implications. The Pain Trust studies, released in 1933, asserted that movies not only inspired aggression and crime but even hysteria and neurological damage in children. The Great Depression added further insecurities to the already great confusions brought about by the revolutionary new ways of communication.

Moreover, popular culture reflected the emergence of new ideals that emphasized leisure, consumption, pleasure, play, immediate gratification, self-realization, and self-fulfillment, ideals that threatened traditional Puritan ones like self-denial and sacrifice. Just around the time the new medium of comic books flourished, then, the cultural elite, Puritan morality, and intellectual liberalism were united in their view of the emerging consumer culture as a serious threat to their various interests and values. Considering these developments, it is easy to see why comic books came under critical attack as soon as the arrival of Superman turned the medium into a hugely successful enterprise.

The denigration of the comic-book industry affected everybody who worked in it. Joe Simon remembers being ashamed of his career in comic books once he had moved on to a more highly regarded profession: "When I did advertising work, for many, many years, I would never admit to having been in comic books" (Schutz and Kitchen: 321). Joe Kubert once described his comic-book work of the time as "a way to make money, that's all. Pure and simple. Nobody was proud of being a comic book artist. Matter of fact, it was a couple of

steps below digging ditches” (quoted in Herman: 65). Various cases of alcoholism, nervous breakdowns, and suicide attempts among comic-book creators were reported during the 1940s.

An editorial titled “A National Disgrace,” written by Sterling North, was published nationwide in over forty newspapers and magazines in 1940, directing its criticism of comic books towards both the new medium’s status as mass culture and its direct targeting of juvenile readers. Comic books were described as “a poisonous mushroom growth” and as a “violent stimulant” that, if not brought under control by parents and teachers, would create “a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one” (quoted in Beaty 2005: 113-14). Elitist distrust of a mass-produced and mass-consumed product met fears about decreasing adult authority over children, and both aspects have remained at the heart of concerns about the various manifestations of youth culture ever since. Responsibility for supervising children’s reading had largely been shifted on to libraries and schools by the late 1930s, and both institutions of authority were starting to pit themselves against the comic book “problem” during the early 1940s in an attempt to re-establish the generational status quo and reinstate structures of cultural authority. Some publishers reacted by returning to the marketing strategy of aiming products eventually meant for children at their parents. During the early 1940s appeared *True Comics* (starring “real life heroes” like Winston Churchill), *Topix Comics* (featuring the pope and Catholic saints), *Picture Stories from the Bible*, and *Classic Comics* (adapting literary classics to the comic book format; it was retitled *Classics Illustrated* in 1947). The commercial success of these titles suggests that many teachers, librarians, and parents were acknowledging the medium’s appeal to children and looking for content more in tune with their own traditional values.

In 1941, a study by child psychiatrists Laretta Bender and Reginald Lourie was published in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* that would be widely quoted in subsequent

articles on comic books. It described superhero stories as a contemporary version of fairy tales, attributed the healthy effect of mental catharsis to the excitement they created, and concluded that adults should be more tolerant of the new medium and its dominating genre (Nyberg: 16). Moreover, a series of studies by Paul Witty from 1941 and 1942 concluded that comic-book readers did not differ from nonreaders in terms of academic achievement and social adjustment, and that comic-book reading had little impact on other types of reading (Beaty 2005: 108-09). These academic examinations were not representative of public opinion, but they provided an effective counterbalance as they were conducted within the walls of an established institution. It would not be until the late 1940s and early 1950s that adult distrust towards comic books escalated into a fully-fledged anti-comic-book crusade.

ⁱ The terms “production” and “consumption” have been adopted from political economy to describe transactions of communication. While the industrial metaphor is useful when analyzing popular culture, the two terms should neither be taken too literally nor understood as absolute antipodes as production to some degree always involves the reception/consumption of antecedent texts, and the reception/consumption of a message always includes an act of producing meanings.

ⁱⁱ The extent to which publishers took copyright ownership for granted and viewed all employees as replaceable is illustrated by Will Eisner’s memories of a meeting he had with Harry Donenfeld, owner of DC, in the early years of the comic-book industry:

“Harry Donenfeld stood with me in an elevator one day and said... ‘What do you mean you want to own this thing? I own everything.’ He was a tough little son-of-a-bitch. ‘Look,’ he said to me, ‘I hire editors, and if the book doesn’t sell, I fire the editors and get somebody else. I can replace anybody I want in my shop.’ He walked off the elevator, and that was the end of the conversation” (Schutz and Brownstein: 155).

ⁱⁱⁱ Joe Simon claims that at the time, an editor at DC explained the lawsuit to him like this: “Captain Marvel is getting too big. Fawcett is too big” (Simon with Simon: 54). C.C. Beck confirms: “That was the basis DC went on. Destroy anybody that was possibly any kind of competition” (Schutz and Kitchen: 66).

^{iv} By the decade’s end, twenty percent of the country’s college-age population was in school, up three hundred percent since the turn of the century (Osgerby: 18).

^v Art Spiegelman ambiguously refers to comics as “a gutter medium,” implying not only the medium’s low cultural prestige, but also the active role of its reader: “It’s what takes place in the gutters between the panels that activates the medium” (1997: 9). The comic-book reader him- or herself creates the product’s narrative rhythm, that is, decides the pace of moving from one panel to the next and of turning the pages. Based on the theories of Marshall McLuhan, John Fiske accordingly describes comics as a “cool medium,” a medium of low definition that provides only “limited data, so the audience has to participate, to be active, in order to complete the message.” Photograph and film, on the other hand, are categorized by Fiske as “hot media,” as they are suggested to be filled with data and thus extend “one single sense” in “high definition” (O’Sullivan *et al.*: 176-77). Their audience, then, tends to be receptive and passive. Even though the concepts of “hot” and “cold media” are best understood as relative tendencies rather than a clear antithesis, they are useful to underline the particularly active role of the comic-book reader.

^{vi} In an effort to attract the elite, large palace-like movie theaters in the style of nineteenth-century opera houses had been built in the 1920s and 1930s. The wealthy new audience was of particular interest to the film industry because it was able to pay higher entrance fees, but this audience in turn demanded a product that complied with its own tastes and values.

Moreover, the film industry had reacted to the threat of federal censorship. After having struggled with attempts at self-regulation throughout the 1920s, the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 set guidelines regarding the portrayal of sex, violence, crime, and religion, but it was not strictly enforced until the creation of the Production Code Administration in June 1934.

Chapter 3ⁱ

The Rise of the Superhero Genre, 1938 to 1941:

Textuality and Ideologyⁱⁱ

Superman

Superman represents the arrival of a character that has become known as the superhero, a character that would dominate the medium of comic books in North America until the mid-1940s, and again from the late 1950s until today. During the 1930s, when some of the rationalizing effects of the Industrial Revolution were falling into disrepute as economic depression and war engulfed the world, the North American public longed for a hero powerful enough to reconcile the social and cultural conflicts of the day and restore order and sanity to a country (and world) threatened by chaos and madness. While mythically elevated frontier vigilantes like Wyatt Earp had been characterized by their ability to conquer and tame the savage American frontier, the new heroes faced the task of resolving urban tensions in an increasingly anonymous industrial society. The stabilizing and utopian function of myth was once again in demand, but the hero of the Wild West's frontier and pioneer days needed to be updated in order to be popular with, that is, relevant to twentieth-century America – and he was updated in *Action Comics* (AC) #1.

On the first page of the first Superman story in *Action Comics* #1 (June 1938), a raw version of the origin of Superman is told:

“As a distant planet was destroyed by old age, a scientist placed his infant son within a hastily devised space-ship, launching it toward Earth! When the vehicle landed on Earth, a passing motorist, discovering the sleeping babe within, turned the child over to an orphanage. Attendants,

unaware the child's physical structure was millions of years advanced of their own, were astounded at his feats of strength. When maturity was reached, he discovered he could easily: leap 1/8th of a mile, hurdle a twenty-story building, raise tremendous weights, run faster than an express train, and that nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin! Early, Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind. And so was created... Superman! Champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!"ⁱⁱⁱ

"Origin stories" that explain the hero's most basic characteristics and motivations would become a staple of the genre. The origin of Superman, like that of most other superheroes that followed, would be retold countless times over the years, with updated versions fleshing out or slightly changing a detail here and there, but the origin story's central elements would remain in place in order to anchor and define the character. In the case of Superman, these basic aspects that still determine the hero's actions today are his heroic but secret identity, his superhuman physical powers, and the unshakable devotion to using these powers for the benefit of mankind. I will now take a closer look at these defining elements that would play a central role in defining the genre.

Being a self-reliant and independent individualist came naturally to the Wild West's unknown redeemer on horseback. The pulp heroes of the Depression years, however, found themselves in an urban, industrialized environment marked by interdependence and conformity. Standing out from the crowd required a conscious effort. Like their precursor Zorro, who was first introduced to the pulp world in 1919, the heroes of the 1930s thus distanced themselves from their environment by hiding their true identities behind masks, cloaks, or costumes. The first appearance of the Shadow in April 1931 heralded a

multitude of pulp magazines^{iv} celebrating “lone wolf” mavericks such as the Spider or the Phantom Detective, masked vigilantes who followed their own code of honor and who managed to defeat the criminals that established authorities were unable or unwilling to arrest by freeing themselves of the system’s institutional and procedural restraints. Lee Falk adopted the concept of the masked hero for the comic-strip medium with *The Phantom* in 1936.

When Siegel and Shuster similarly gave Superman a secret identity, they paid tribute to the concept’s roots by naming a character in the second story of 1939’s *Superman* (SUP) #1 – Emil Norvell, a munitions tycoon – after the popular pulp writers Emile Tepperman and Norvell Page. The costume Superman is provided with is much more flamboyant than those of his pulp precursors, though, and Will Eisner suggests that its look was influenced by that of circus strongmen from the 1930s: “The tights, the spandex, and the cape were straight out of the Barnum & Bailey Circus. Strongmen always wore capes, tight-fitting costumes” (Schutz and Brownstein: 137).

When the hero’s origin is retold in the opening story of *Superman* #1, the theme of the secret identity is further developed by removing Clark from those “astounded attendants” (see above) while growing up. Instead, Clark is now adopted as an infant and raised by foster parents named Kent who advise their child to hide his powers: “Now listen to me, Clark! This great strength of yours – you’ve got to hide it from people or they’ll be scared of you!” When Superman first appears in his costume nobody is able to make a connection between the hero and Clark, even though the costume does not hide his face. Costumes would become one of the most recognizable genre conventions. By 1943, the narrator of *Superman* #21’s “The Robber Knight” acknowledges it as a standard requisite, referring to the outfit as the hero’s “famous red-and-blue action costume.” While the costume is described to function as a device that protects the hero’s secret identity and as having a

psychological effect on opponents, Mila Bongco points out that superhero costumes also helped the reader identify the heroic characters at a time when the visuals of comics suffered from poor paper quality (104).

In order to further conceal his Superman identity, the hero develops an alternate insecure and timid persona as the newspaper reporter Clark Kent. This double identity results in an ironically twisted relationship between Clark Kent/Superman and Lois Lane, a newspaper co-worker Clark falls in love with. Lois despises the seemingly cowardly Clark and adores only Superman, whose heroic responsibilities leave no time for romance. After having been rescued once again by her hero in *Superman* #3 (2nd story, 1940), she tells him: “The first time you carried me like this I was frightened – just as I was frightened of you. But now I love it – just as I love you! Don’t go! Stay with me... always.” When Clark shortly afterwards entrusts to her the fact that he “still likes her,” Lois answers bluntly: “Who cares! (“—The spineless worm! I can hardly bear looking at him. After having been in the arms of a real he man’-).”

The antithesis between adored hero and rejected alter ego would be copied in countless other superhero comic books of the so-called Golden Age, generally conceived as the time period from 1938 to the late 1940s,^v as it invited the reader to identify with the (seemingly) powerless Clark while providing the personified wish fulfillment in Superman. On the one hand, the relationship’s lack of sexual prospects allowed the preadolescent reader whose romantic fantasies do not yet involve physical sex to learn about the concept of love from a safe distance. On the other, it reflected the Depression era’s unwritten social laws of adolescence that required boys to forgo serious romance until they were enrolled in college and thus on their way to becoming breadwinners, and girls to preserve their “good names” by protecting their innocence.

Interestingly, Clark Kent does not fall in love with a woman settling for the traditional role of mother and homemaker that dominated the social construction of femininity during the Depression years, but with the gainfully employed Lois Lane, a career-minded and proud woman who likes to present herself as independent and emancipated. The character of Lois Lane mirrors the gradually changing status of women in society at the decade's end and particularly during the war, and it could not have met with popular success at a time when women were still firmly confined to domestic and traditional female roles. Yet while the text acknowledges emerging female claims to the sphere of work, it certainly does not wholeheartedly embrace them. The plot always proves that Lois is much more dependent on a male hero than she cares to admit, assigning her the permanent role of damsel in distress. The damsel in distress, of course, needs to be rescued by the "gallant rescuer" (SUP #1, 2nd story), and Superman certainly appreciates the opportunity: "Twenty to one Lois is in a tough jam right now! That gal's a natural for getting involved in mischief – but that's just what I like about her!" (AC #27, 1940).

Lois Lane does not take on narrative value as a fully developed character in her own right, but strictly in terms of the game of masculinity. Her function in this game is twofold. First, she provides Superman with the opportunity to master physical challenges by getting into trouble over her head and awaiting rescue. Second, as we have seen, she repeatedly creates situations in which he can prove his hyper-masculine dedication to the heroic mission by rejecting her romantic advances. Lois Lane thus enables Superman to display his mastery over the outside world as well as over "the enemy within," that is, over his own feminine tendencies. She is the narrative element that casts the hero as a personification of masculinity.

Our concepts of sexual identity can be traced back to the Renaissance, when a split started developing between production and consumption, work and leisure, the factory and home.

As work has become masculinized and leisure feminized, the idea of male and female has been polarized. Sexual identity, understood by psychoanalysis as nothing more than a preference or predominance, has been cast as a relatively fixed entity. The demands of capitalism have promoted and entrenched this closed and ultimately unattainable concept of sexual identity, creating what Antony Easthope refers to as “the Masculine Myth” that requires the contemporary man “to be one sex all the way through” (1992: 6), that is, to repress his own femininity.

In the terms of psychoanalysis, the hero’s double identity represents a split between the ego and the superego, ascribing extended meaning to an originally specific and necessary stage in the individual’s development. The ordinary self, Clark Kent, is connoted with various social attributes of traditional femininity. He is soft-spoken, gentle, affectionate, sensitive, understanding, companionable, in need of harmony and endearment, dependent, obedient, timid, faint-hearted, cowardly, vulnerable. Superman, on the other hand, is the hyper-masculine ideal, the result of the complete ex-scription of the feminine. His clearly defined body represents a purely masculine unity that manages to exclude the Other, particularly the feminine that is to Superman nothing more than a potential security risk. While Clark longs for a romantic relationship with Lois and suffers rejection, Superman turns the table by rejecting the romantic advances of Lois and thus his own femininity. Superman, after all, is invulnerable. He has mastered, as we have seen, both the outside world and the enemy within.

His defensiveness, however, just like the defensiveness of the masculine ego in general, falls under the shadow of paranoia. In *Superman* #10 (3rd story, 1941), the hero sympathizes with the idea of a permanently locked up Lois: “For once, Lois is where she can’t venture into further mischief – in this basket! But... it’s too good to last! [to Lois:] Maybe this will teach you to avoid danger!” Lois, to be sure, replies when climbing out of the basket: “I’m

more determined than ever to find out...” Even a superman, then, is unable to realize the ultimate patriarchal dream of permanently subordinating the feminine.^{vi}

The genre-typical celebration of a masculine ideal that obviously does not exist in real life can be read as a desperate attempt to re-inscribe the domination of women by men, as an attempt at ideological remasculinization in response to the very real threat to male power posed by the changing status of women in society.

Redeeming the unstable and conflicted society of the Great Depression was no easy task and seemed to call for an outstandingly powerful heroic figure. Superman’s powers, like those of most superheroes that followed in his footsteps, are based predominantly on physical abilities. Inspiration was provided by a daily newspaper strip that had originally been launched in 1919, E.C. Segar’s *Thimble Theatre*, when it in 1929 debuted an immensely popular character equipped with superhuman physical powers, Popeye.^{vii} Another influence was Edgar Rice Burroughs’ pulp novel *Tarzan of the Apes* from 1912, in which the hero, having been nurtured by apes, develops superhuman physical abilities that enable him to “fly” from vine to vine.^{viii} Philip Wylie’s popular novel *Gladiator*, published in 1930, presents a hero who, just like Superman, possesses superhuman physical powers including invulnerable skin, hides these powers from the world at large, and keeps them in check with a profound sense of justice. The pulp hero Doc Savage debuted in 1933’s *Doc Savage Magazine*. Advertised as a “superman” as early as 1934, he is an avenger of superhuman strength who can run faster than a horse, bite through nails, and untie knots with his tongue.

Superman himself takes the notion of physical powers a step further. While his abilities are still rather limited during the early months of publication, they soon surpass, without narrative explanation, those of his predecessors. From *Action Comics* #18 (1939) on, he is suddenly equipped with “x-ray eyes and super-sensitive ears,” and from #35 (1941) on,

he can fly. Before long, Superman has become a nearly omnipotent figure who gets his Achilles' heel (in the form of surviving fragments from his exploded home planet Krypton) only in 1949's *Superman* #61.^{ix} Why did the fantasy of superhuman physical abilities hold such fascination for the American public in the 1930s and early '40s?

With the country's passage into the industrialized age, the traditional concept of society as a relationship between solitary, autonomous individuals had gradually been replaced by a new concept of society as the product of interaction between interrelated, conformed, and ultimately replaceable components. As the self was increasingly identified in terms of its relationships to others, standing out from the crowd was turning into a challenge. The development of psychological and psychiatric studies in the early twentieth century had sparked a new interest in self-development and self-mastery. By the 1930s, manuals and guides for self-improvement were sweeping the country, proposing the legitimacy, even the necessity of an open and unashamed focus on self-presentation; offering marketable solutions to a psychological challenge Alfred Adler had identified in the late 1920s as the "inferiority complex." The body itself was becoming a focal point – it had to be beautified and dressed in a new world of physical culture, dieting, fashion, and cosmetics. In high schools, popularity was becoming the measure of success. Traditional Puritan notions of "character" and "morality" were gradually supplanted by newer ones of "personality" and "aura."

The comic-book fantasy of the superpowered body illustrates this new focus on physical qualities, the desire to admirably distinguish oneself from the crowd, to ensure the survival of individual personality in a potentially anonymous mass society. While the "character" of the typical Golden-Age superhero is consistently portrayed as flawless and is thus never called into question by the plot, admiration for the hero's unique abilities is, as we have

seen, a central element of many storylines revolving around the relationship between Superman/Clark Kent and Lois Lane.^x

During the pre-war years, Superman revels in his own strength and takes full advantage of his powers, rarely showing mercy or restraint. He clearly enjoys the intimidating effect of his hyper-masculinity and looks forward to displaying it: “It’s about time for my daily exercise! Yes~sir~ee! I think I’m going to enjoy this private little war!” (AC #12, 1939). Organized around the elements of combat, victory, and defeat, both sport and war tend to be cast as deeply masculine in dominant culture. Superman sometimes feels “the urge to wring [an opponent’s] neck,” and when this opponent robs him of the opportunity by confessing instantly he expresses disappointment: “I’d hoped I’d have to use a little ‘persuasion’ on you!” (SUP #2, “Superman and the Skyscrapers,” 1939). When the hero gets the opportunity, he “gleefully... runs amuck” (AC #12, 1939) or “begins a clean-up campaign which for sheer thoroughness and unorthodox procedure has never before been witnessed” (SUP #7, 3rd story, 1940).

The popularity of represented violence has been argued by John Fiske to be a necessary product of the social experience of the subordinate, as physical conflict becomes the metaphorical expression of the class or social conflict (2004: 134). It comes as no surprise, then, that the superhero comic books popular during the Great Depression, when the gap between the haves and the have-nots had grown to unprecedented size, are marked by a particularly violent brand of heroism. Occasionally, the hero’s violent actions take their ultimate toll. To the accidental death of an opponent, Superman reacts without any signs of regret: “If he hadn’t tried to stab me, he’d be alive now. – But the fate he received was exactly what he deserved!” (AC #13, 1939). The Superman of the pre-war period does not even shy away from intentionally killing his opponents, stating simply: “One less vulture!” (SUP #2, “Superman Champions Universal Peace,” 1939).^{xi}

In cases like this, the plot provides the moral alibi and implicitly supports it by constructing the hero as an expression of the natural wildness of masculinity. Superman does not feel the need to intellectually reflect upon how to use his powers to the desired effect. He appears to be guided by an impeccable form of common sense, one uncompromised by the limitations of the subjective human perspective. His actions never have unintended consequences that might undermine his rogue heroic efforts. The intuitive application of his physical superiority is portrayed as the necessary solution to the problems of his world – a narrative that promotes an ideology of male supremacy. Two of his most favored problem-solving techniques are violently enforced confessions and giving opponents a “taste of their own medicine.”

During the 1920s, when Freudian analysis dominated intellectual circles in America, the consequences of the frontier experience were typically viewed critically by the cultural elite. The pioneer experience was argued to have formed an anti-intellectual type incapable of meeting current social, political, and economic demands. By the late 1920s, however, the intellectual concept of the historic frontier experience as useless began to meet with popular opposition. The Puritan values of the Founding Fathers, which had generally enjoyed a good press during the nineteenth century, were, in a rejection of Eastern intellectual elitism, widely celebrated by the popular media of the 1930s. The portrayal of Superman’s impulsive physicality as just and successful illustrates this cultural trend. The hero’s instant judgment of people or situations proves to be flawless; the moral authority of his actions, no matter how violent, is never called into question by plot or narrator. In an attempt to counter the intellectual onslaught and reclaim moral authority for the frontier process, the stories promote intuitive rather than cognitive ability and thus a distinctly anti-intellectual ethos. In this sense, the bodily principle can be read as a conservative liberator of the Puritan past.

Alternately and almost contrarily, however, this bodily principle can also be read as another subversive attack on Puritan values. Myths tend to work metonymically, and the bodily principle that a mythical hero like Superman represents can act as a metonym for the refusal to accept the social identity proposed by dominant ideology. The Christian church has traditionally conceptualized the body as a threat to the purity of the soul, displacing social control onto the body in the name of individual morality. Carnival is understood by Mikhail Bakhtin as the liberation of the body from this control, as “a transfer to the material level” (19) that underlies and precedes spirituality and social hierarchy. Carnival thus constructs an alternate world outside officialdom that replaces hierarchy and ideological control with physical sensations and freedom, with excessiveness, exaggeration, offensiveness, rule-breaking, degradation, and laughter. All of these elements are an integral part of most superhero comics during the American pre-war period. Much like the carnival of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance, they center on the body and its sensations rather than on the mind and its intellectual abilities, for bodily pleasures constitute the popular terrain where hegemony is weakest. Both in carnival and in the Superman comics of the pre-war years, destruction and uncrowning are related to birth and renewal and thus presented in a festive spirit; the death of the old is linked with regeneration. In this sense, the powerful body of the superhero can be read as a metaphor for the subordinated, oppositional body.

In summary, the early comic books’ festive celebration of the superhero’s raw, excessively violent, authority-degrading, law-breaking agenda can be read both as a conservative, reactionary, ideologically incorporative (patriarchal, nationalistic, anti-intellectual) discourse, and as a progressive, ideologically subversive (carnavalesque) one.^{xii}

During the Great Depression, a law-abiding and system-approving hero appeared unable to resolve the contradictions and conflicts of society. The pre-war Superman, just like the

mythically elevated frontier vigilante or the pulp hero, follows a code of ethics that does not necessarily comply with the law of the state, but with “higher” ideals. He redeems society by uncompromisingly confronting its ills, by taking on the criminal element on his own terms, that is, by rising above institutions and laws. The system’s unreliability during the Great Depression, much like that of the Wild West’s frontier and pioneer days, provided an ideal seedbed for vigilante fantasies. Superman decides to follow his own moral code and enforces it with his fists. As a result, he is almost constantly in conflict with the police, even though some police officers may admit their sympathies for the vigilante when talking to a reporter off the record: “You can tell your readers that we’ll spare no effort to apprehend Superman – but off the record... I think he did a splendid thing and I’d like to shake his hand!” (AC #8, 1939).

The need to rise above the law is portrayed as justified by the justice system’s unreliability. Superman forces several corrupt police commissioners out of office (AC #16, 1939; SUP #7, 2nd story, 1940; AC #37, 1941) and fights a prison’s “rotten conditions” brought about by its sadistic superintendant (AC #10, 1939).^{xiii} In most cases, the narrative personalizes social conflict into conflict between individuals, as framing social issues in terms of individual personalities enables the hero to achieve justice without starting a fully-fledged revolution. It is up to the reader, then, to construct the rest of the “story.” Occasionally, however, the narrative does not provide any individual cases of corruption, causing the hero to explicitly doubt the justice system itself. When in *Action Comics* #8 (1939) a mother suggests that her criminal son “might have been a good boy except for his environment,” Superman agrees: “The mother’s right! But if I know the court of law... her plea hasn’t a chance!” Later he decides to free four burglars from the grip of the police, because he understands that their “poor living conditions” are at least partly to blame. In *Action Comics* #39 (1941), the narrator describes “the forces of the law [as] apparently

impotent.” In fact, the very concept of the superhero depends on a critical depiction of the justice system, for only a flawed justice system creates the need for a potent hero who breaks the rules in order to provide the subordinate with a glimpse at the kind of justice they desire.

It is not the law or any other social institution, then, that provides Superman with legitimacy and moral authority, but his community-minded revolting against institutions portrayed as misguided and inefficient at best, corrupt and ruthless at worst. At a time when many people desperately longed for social change,^{xiv} a hero equipped with the powers deemed necessary to challenge the status quo provided the pleasure of imaginative wish fulfillment. Apart from the forces of law and order, Superman takes aim at the unscrupulous greed of the economic establishment personified by various corrupt business owners (SUP #1, 2nd and 3rd story, 1939; SUP #2, “Superman and the Skyscrapers,” 1939).^{xv} Last but not least, “crooked politics” (SUP #7, 3rd story, 1940) are targeted by the rage of Superman. A local government (AC #8, 1939), several corrupt mayors (AC #12, 1939; SUP #6, 4th story, 1940), and various other “evil, conniving public officeholders” (SUP #7, 3rd story, 1940) are called to account for their misdeeds. Superman himself sums up the situation like this: “I tell you... --there’s a sinister link between certain crooked politicians and the criminal element in this town! We’ve got to do something about it!” (AC #37, 1941).

Fighting various representatives of the power bloc, the superpowered societal watchdog becomes the “champion of the oppressed.” By the decade’s end, he has rescued, among others, an innocent woman from an erroneous death sentence, a wife from her abusive husband (AC #1, 1938), an old man “faced with bitter disappointment and certain defeat” from desperation (AC #7, 1938), “hard, resentful, underprivileged boys” from unacceptable living conditions (AC #8, 1939), “impoverished people” from their misery

(AC #16, 1939), the potential victims of a war from the threat of death and destruction (SUP #1, 2nd story, 1939), poor immigrants from corporate exploitation (SUP #1, 3rd story), a betrayed and desperate boxer from committing suicide (SUP #2, 1st story, 1939), and helpless orphans from the ruthless superintendent of their orphanage (SUP #3, 1st story, 1940). Superman creates “splendid housing conditions” where slums used to spread (AC #8, 1939), “clean[s] up the conditions on the chain gang” (AC #10, 1939), and supports social welfare work (AC #15, 1939).

I have shown above that the Superman comic books of the American pre-war years frequently portray criminal activity in its social context. Small-time crooks are not demonized, but shown as products of a society portrayed as unfair and cruel. Criminal activity performed by members of the establishment, on the other hand, is described as decidedly less worthy of social considerations and is judged more harshly by the hero. Still, a super-powered character of absolute moral integrity seemed to call for an equally one-dimensional and (almost) equally powerful antagonist who would make a worthy opponent, and thus complete a binary universe characterized by the struggle between good and evil. This moral polarity, a trademark of popular culture in general as it provokes repetitive event-centered narratives marked by strong conflicts, has been criticized by John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett as antithetical to a democratic ethos that relies on compromise and acknowledges that “the good” cannot be objectively identified but must be debated and voted upon (278-82). While this is a valid concern, we should keep in mind that early comic books were consumed predominantly by pre-adolescent readers, and that the lack of ambiguity is essential to stories targeting young readers who still tend to think in terms of clearly drawn opposites.

In 1939's *Action Comics* #13, a first super-villain called the Ultra-Humanite was introduced – the model for the majority of the many upcoming super-villains in various titles of the genre. The Ultra-Humanite tells his own story like this:

“A scientific experiment resulted in my possessing the most agile and learned brain on Earth! – Unfortunately for mankind, I prefer to use this great intellect for crime. My goal? Domination of the world!!”

Significantly, he is no victim of circumstance but freely chooses to dedicate his “sinister intelligence” to crime. This freedom of choice separates the Ultra-Humanite from those criminals Superman has identified as victims of oppression and therefore does not hold completely responsible for their deeds. The Ultra-Humanite has the privilege to choose whether he wants to be “good” or “evil,” and this privilege comes with complete responsibility for the choice. He understands this responsibility, which is why he refers to his own crimes as “evil enterprises.” A truly “evil” disposition, of course, can never be altered by the hero, because it is not based on flawed living conditions that could be identified and improved. As a result, the Ultra-Humanite and all the super-villains that have followed can never be reformed and reintegrated into society.

The Ultra-Humanite addresses Superman with the words: “It was inevitable that we should clash! ...You may possess unbelievable strength – but you are pitting yourself against a mental giant!” The evil villain who has decided to harm mankind sets his extraordinary intelligence against the physical super-strength of the good hero who has “decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind” (AC #1, 1938). Intellectual power is linked to evil deeds, physical power to good ones. This binary opposition based on intellect and physicality is further complemented by the portrayal of the villain as physically handicapped; the narrator refers to him as a “crippled madman.” While the anti-intellectual popular sentiments of the 1930s discussed above certainly had

an impact on the concept of the villain, this kind of opposition between a physically beautiful hero who embodies the socially moral and a less physically attractive villain whose intellectual abilities are not controlled by moral consciousness is generally typical of popular culture.^{xvi}

Once Superman has defeated the villain, he has to learn that his triumph is not complete. The hero cannot find any trace of his opponent and suggests the possibility of his reappearance in the future: “Well, that finishes his plan to control the Earth – or does it?” This kind of open ending would become a genre convention, enabling the producers and creators to return their villains whenever popularity demanded it. Moreover, the temporary character of the hero’s success hints at the mythic nature of the resolution provided by the hero. The hero’s mythic function, as I will unfold in more detail below, is to cope with conflict in an imaginative way, even though the actual conflicts of society can never be completely resolved. A hero figure like Superman, then, demonstrates that society, taking advantage of the anxiety-reducing mechanism of myth, finds ways of living with contradictions and problems, even though it is ultimately unable to resolve them.^{xvii}

The next super-villain to appear, Luthor,^{xviii} is based on a concept that very much resembles that of his predecessor. In *Superman #4* (1st story, 1940), the hero describes Luthor just like he could have described the Ultra-Humanite: “The mad scientist who plots to dominate the Earth!” Luthor himself outlines his conflict with the hero like this:

“Here is my proposition – and challenge! If your muscles can surpass my scientific feats, I will admit defeat. But if I can outdo you, then you are to retire and leave me a clear path! Do you accept?”

Superman does, of course, and once again the combination of superior physicality and community-minded restraint defeats that of extraordinary intellectual capability and self-

importance. In the end, once again, the defeated villain disappears without a trace: “No sight of him!”

In 1940, appearances of super-villains become more frequent in the Superman stories. Both America’s beginning economic recovery and the growing threat of a world war played an essential role in the gradual disappearance of superheroic social crusading, for they made domestic issues of social injustice appear less significant. As the national mood shifted, so did the job description of the superhero. Late in 1940, Superman started to face Nazi spies and fifth columnists.

Acknowledging the fact that meaning can only ever be contextual, we are left with the above outlined discourses struggling for dominance in the Superman narrative. Some of these discourses have been in the focus of one or another separate analysis of a certain aspect of the genre; others have been neglected or ignored. I want to suggest, however, that only a broad examination of the multiple discourses that constitute the superhero, one that does not restrict itself to any particular master discourse, is able to fully grasp the character’s mythical function. I argue that the comic books’ ability to mythically reconcile contradictory cultural trends only reveals itself when fully considering their inherent struggle for meanings.

Claude Levi-Strauss views myth as an anxiety-reducing mechanism that “expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire” (17), providing imaginative ways of living with cultural contradictions which ultimately cannot be resolved in reality. Roland Barthes elaborates that myth “could not care less about contradictions so long as it establishes a euphoric security,” that “any myth with some degree of generality is in fact ambiguous” (70, 157). It is in this sense that Superman fictitiously harmonizes a diverse assembly of desires, providing a wide range of popular pleasures. He mythically reconciles, as we have seen, the attempt to protect patriarchal and national interests with a fight against

oppression that violently challenges the status quo. He combines the industrial fantasy of personal triumph over anonymity with the Puritan ideal of selfless devotion to the community. Such a wide range of discourses can be merged into one mythic figure only because myth empties reality by depoliticizing it; because myth naturalizes its discourses by distorting their meaning, by reducing their history to a mere gesture.

At a time when American society was characterized by inner strife and confusion, the comic books' ability to deal with social and cultural contradictions was essential to their popular appeal. When the gap between contradicting categories seemed too stark to be bridged and the contradictions too violent to be coped with, Superman acted as a mediator between opposing concepts. The Superman of the pre-war years is a reformer equipped with patriarchal powers. By drawing characteristics from both progressive and conservative value systems, he not only illustrates the social and cultural struggles of his time, but takes on excessive meaning. It is through his extraordinary semiotic power that he acquires heroic, even mythic stature.

Not only early superhero comic books represent a contested terrain in which multiple discourses struggle for meanings, of course. Popular texts in general can never be entirely closed around one reading but always remain polysemic. Yet textual agencies promote certain reading positions over others, and the promoted reading positions are usually at peace with the status quo while oppositional ones require a more active effort on the part of the consumer. Popular heroes accordingly tend to be socially central types who embody the dominant ideology, whereas popular villains are socially marginalized types who oppose it. The popular culture of the late 1930s was by and large no exception, as it had a strong tendency to portray society as characterized by unity and harmony.

The degree to which Superman and most other comic-book heroes of the American pre-war years embody ideological values of subordinate groups is thus extraordinary and can be explained only with the following combination of circumstances. On the one hand, the difficult economic conditions of the late Depression years resulted in widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo. On the other, the comic-book medium was still in a state of infancy. By the late 1930s, newspaper strips and motion pictures had been constituents of Americana long enough to be absorbed by the American mainstream. Both the film industry and the newspaper publishing houses had by this time made considerable concessions to the power bloc in an effort to both gain a financially stronger audience and avoid state censorship. The comic-book industry meanwhile took full advantage of its initial status as cultural outlaw and whole-heartedly exploited the Depression Era's many fears, its sense of frustration and injustice. To be sure, popular products are developed within, and according to, the conditions of patriarchal capitalist societies and can therefore never be radically opposed to the status quo, but the pre-war comic-book industry delivered a product that went considerably further than its competitors in painting a critical picture of American society. What is more, it painted this critical picture at a time when the threat of a world war was becoming increasingly apparent and calls for national unity were getting louder. This disregard for cultural norms, along with the revolutionary marketing strategy of directly targeting preadolescent readers, played a central role in the comic books' early popular appeal. Considering the historical and popular developments of the time, however, it comes as no surprise that the publishing house DC would soon introduce an internal code in order to enforce a more conservative hero concept as soon as an American entry into World War II became likely and the economy was showing signs of recovery.

Popular culture tends to offer images of something we want that our everyday lives do not provide. Its visual element, central to the grammar of comic books, has been argued by Antony Easthope to be formally predisposed towards wish fulfillment, as it eludes criticism and allows desire to transcend contradictions (1991: 93). Superman can certainly be read as personified wish fulfillment, as an empowerment fantasy in response to needs created by society. Offering simple but unchallengeable two-fisted solutions to complex problems, he fictitiously succeeds in overcoming frustrations encountered in the everyday lives of many at the time of publication. During the Great Depression, a sense of shame engulfed many Americans who found their accustomed way of life altered, and this sense of shame was at the heart of the decade's characteristic desire for heroes and myths. Significantly, many superheroes found themselves treated with contempt and even humiliated in their plebeian identities, as we have seen.

Fictional heroes can function as vehicles of wish fulfillment only if the reader identifies with them. Sigmund Freud has defined identification as a psychological activity motivated by the subconscious. The reader is imagined by Freud to submerge his or her own identity into that of a fictional character who embodies the reader's unsatisfied desires. Based on this concept, identification has been criticized both as escapism and as a process whereby dominant values are naturalized into the desires of the reader. John Fiske, on the other hand, views identification as initiated by a conscious decision: "[Readers] 'know' at some level that characters are not real, and that identifying with them is a form of intentional self-delusion" rewarded by pleasure. As a result, "the [reader] is less a subject of the dominant ideology and more in control of the process of identification and thus of his or her own meanings." Identification, as understood by Fiske, involves a dual positioning of the reader, one characterized simultaneously by deception and the awareness of this deception, by being self-implicated in, and self-extricated from, the text. Fiske calls this complex reading

position “implication-extrication” and views it as a major source of pleasure for the reader (1992a: 170-75).^{xix}

Identification remains a disputed concept, because it cannot be measured and its scientific verification is accordingly problematic. However, there is general agreement that various forms of identification exist, and that they serve different purposes for the preadolescent reader of a comic book, for the adult viewer of a television program, and for the cinemagoer. Whether identification should ultimately be understood as a form of escapism, as a process that naturalizes dominant ideology, as a consciously initiated dual reading position, or as a combination of all these notions cannot be decided within the framework of this book. Whatever the case, heroes who epitomize a body of cultural values and moral beliefs are integral to popular forms of identification. Children in particular frequently try to compensate for their subjectively experienced personal powerlessness by creating a fictional, powerful “secret identity” for themselves. As surrogate selves, that is, as vehicles for wish fulfillment, superheroes would accordingly prove especially popular among preadolescent readers who, once they have discovered the limitations of their parents’ potentials, tend to project power fantasies onto omnipotent alter-ego constructs.^{xx}

Among the preadolescent and adolescent audience, the Superman character proved particularly popular with boys, who had already learnt that capitalist ideology connotes masculinity with dominance but had not yet acquired the social position or physical strength necessary to meet these expectations. Superman can be read as a fantasy of masculinity as physical strength. The popularity of the character among young boys, accordingly, depends to a significant extent on the degree to which it offers meanings that help the reader come to terms with the contrast between the young male reader’s personal experience and the social construction of masculinity. Clark Kent, seemingly every bit as timid and powerless as the reader, has the fantastic ability to transform himself into the

powerful Superman: “I had to take it as Clark Kent... but here’s where I dish out as Superman!” (SUP #21, “The Four Gangleaders,” 1943). A fictional world in which marvelously revealed physical strength provides the means to cope with any imaginable antagonism holds the attraction of a fantastic ticket to masculinity and its ideological prerequisite, power. The hero’s successful performance fictitiously closes the gap between the penis and the phallus,^{xvi} a fantasy nurtured in early issues of *Superman* by instructions for “acquiring super-strength” and “attaining super-health” that were presented as realistic and appropriate for children (#1-3, 1939).

Yet not only preadolescent boys experience problems with patriarchy’s construction of masculinity. The idea that a man – almost like a superhero – must be able to cope with any situation creates a gap between the ideological construction of masculinity and the material experience of any man. This gap can never be closed, but it keeps men striving for the primary markers of masculinity, achievement and successful performance, and thus maintains the “naturalness” of the ideological concept of progress, which is central to capitalism. In the Superman comic books, as in most other titles of the genre, each storyline is concluded by a successful display of masculine performance. The patriarchal discourse of the Superman comics, then, complies with the capitalist interests of the comic-book industry itself. This is no surprise, for the capitalist system reproduces itself ideologically in its commodities in order to naturalize itself, that is, in order to appear to be the only economic system possible.

The Batman

The origin of the Batman is revealed in *Detective Comics* (DC) #33, and it puts a new spin on the concept of the superhero. As a helpless child, Bruce Wayne witnesses the murder of

his parents. In his grief he vows: “And I swear by the spirits of my parents to avenge their deaths by spending the rest of my life warring on all criminals.” This promise determines his life:

“As the years pass, Bruce Wayne prepares himself for his career. He becomes a master scientist. Trains his body to physical perfection until he is able to perform amazing athletic feats.”

When the time comes to go into action, he is inspired by a bat flying through his window:

“Dad’s estate left me wealthy. I am ready... But first I must have a disguise. Criminals are a superstitious cowardly lot. So my disguise must be able to strike terror into their hearts. I must be a creature of the night, black, terrible... a... a... a bat! That’s it! It’s an omen. I shall become a bat!”

The narrator announces: “And thus is born this weird figure of the dark... this avenger of evil, ‘The Batman’.”

While both Superman and the Batman lose their families at a young age, three distinctive features set the latter apart. First, the Batman’s decision to be a crime-fighter gets a grim psychological foundation. Clark Kent loses his parents as an infant, unconscious of the fact at the time. As he grows up, his adoptive parents ensure that he is able to overcome the loss of the biological parents. When, as an adult, he decides that “he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind” (AC #1, 1938), this decision is unrelated to the loss of his biological parents and exclusively motivated by a perceived responsibility for humankind. Bruce Wayne, in contrast, is first and foremost motivated by the traumatic event of his parents’ murder. He fights crime in order to “avenge their deaths” (DC #33, 1939), reflecting the rise of urban crime and angst during the Great

Depression. He seeks “vengeance” (DC #32, 1939) and “retribution” (DC #34, 1939). In spite of this rather dark motivation, however, the Batman of the 1930s and ’40s is never shown to be a psychologically unbalanced character haunted by his past. Rather, he is portrayed as a person who has been able to turn his grief into channels that benefit both the citizens of Gotham City and his own peace of mind. As a result, his crime-fighting career is depicted as perfectly reasonable and appropriate.

Second, the science fiction-based aspect of Superman’s origin is dropped. The Batman is not an alien naturally gifted with superhuman powers on our planet, but an at least theoretically vulnerable human being relying on extraordinary physical and mental education and on a variety of technological devices. The Batman possesses no superhuman powers; his transformation to superheroic status is the result of intentional effort. He therefore appeals to a slightly older reader than Superman, a reader who no longer perceives power as magical endowment but already understands its link to effort and work. Moreover, technical devices like the ones employed by the Batman hold a particular attraction for boys already aware of the gap between their lack of physical strength and the masculine ideal. Weapons and machinery are their means of entry into the masculine, and the reading experience accordingly provides them with the pleasure of an imagined bridging of the gap between the powerless social position they occupy and the social construction of masculinity, one that does not rely on magical or alien endowment.

Third, Bruce Wayne is able to dedicate his whole life to crime-fighting because he inherits his parents’ wealth and is thus placed outside the constraints of capitalist accumulation: “Dad’s estate left me wealthy. I am ready...” (DC #33, 1939). While work-related soap opera aspects quickly become an integral part of the Superman stories (Lois and Clark work for the same newspaper), the Batman plots focus much more on the hero-persona than the alter ego.

Arguably, it is the Batman's human origin that most crucially sets him (and most subsequent superheroes) apart from Superman. While Superman is conceived as a godlike redeemer who has literally fallen from the sky, the Batman is a product of urban violence and redeems industrial society from within. While Superman represents the hope for otherworldly redemption of our troubled industrial society, the Batman embodies the possibility to self-reliantly conquer what is portrayed as the industrial nightmare. The powers of the heroes that followed would be placed somewhere in between the poles defined by Superman and the Batman, that is, between the poles of given, nearly omnipotent abilities on the one side, and acquired skills which leave the hero vulnerable (at least theoretically) on the other side. The majority of the subsequent heroes would, like Superman, receive their powers through an extraordinary twist of fate, but they would be human and their powers would be, like those of the Batman, of a less prominent nature than those of Superman. I will unfold below, though, that while the definition of their superpowers fits into the pattern established by Superman and the Batman, their political agendas would occasionally differ greatly from the excessively violent social crusades originally established by the "two titans."

In Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, one of the infant's first constructions of identity is that of gender. According to Freud, the boy quickly grasps the link between masculinity and social power. He tries to achieve this power by identifying with the father's sphere of masculinity, while suppressing both his love for his mother and the feminine in himself. Women, as embodiments of the feminine, thus come to represent the repressed in the male and the devalued in patriarchal society, that is, emotion, vulnerability, and commitment. The presence of women is a threat to the masculine, for it is a reminder of the male's guilt and brings with it the fear of castration. John Fiske suggests that the "weak" and "inferior" characteristics of the feminine are "exscribed" from masculine narratives, just as they are

repressed by the masculine psyche, because the topic of femininity would be psychologically and ideologically discomfoting to their male target audience (1992a: 202-04). Women, as embodiments of the feminine, are written out of masculine narratives for the same reasons. Some masculine narratives explicitly require their male heroes to escape from women's restraints and rise above sexual temptation in order to become maximally effective warriors, an imperative that John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett identify as a leitmotif of what they call the "American monomyth":

"This articulation of the myth demands that the corrupted community, rather than setting itself right through a pragmatic politics of relative equals, be purged by spasms of violence controlled by lone males" (153).

Young Bruce is determined to become such a "lone" and thus maximally effective warrior, vowing to spend "the rest of [his] life warring on all criminals" (DC #33, 1939). Even though this kind of dedication would not seem to leave much room for other interests, an attempt is made to transfer the romance element of the successful Superman formula to the world of the Batman. From late 1939 to early 1941, Bruce Wayne is engaged to a lady named Julie Madson. This relationship allows for an imagined "love triangle" in the vein of the Superman stories and has Julie lament: "What an exciting character, that Batman! – Why can't you be that sort of man?" (DC #39, 1940). Or: "That's the sort of career I wish Bruce would pick up for himself! But I guess that's wishing for the impossible!" (DC #49, 1941). Just like Lois Lane's admiration for Superman, hers for the Batman is rooted in a lack of sovereignty: "But I am so afraid without you!!" (DC #32, 1939). After only a few appearances, however, Julie is exscribed from the narrative when she announces to Bruce: "Until you decide to make something of yourself, I'm afraid our engagement is off!" (DC #49, 1941). With her disappearance from the stories, Bruce Wayne no longer faces any

significant romantic distractions. Fulfilling the vow made in his youth, he becomes a monomythic hero dedicated solely to his mission as the Batman.

While the exscription of the feminine is particularly distinctive in the Batman texts, it is, with the notable exceptions of the stories starring Wonder Woman and Plastic Man, a trademark of the superhero genre in general at least until the late 1950s. The genre's male hero is conventionally adored and even loved by a female character unaware of his secret identity, but the hero repeatedly rejects that woman's desire for intimacy, thus, in psychoanalytical terms, legitimating the male reader's rejection of the mother and his repression of the aspects she represents by affirming the masculine need for independence. The logic of the narrative dictates that the hero can save others only by rejecting the feminine, reducing it to a threat to masculine heroism.

The theme of heroic sexual renunciation reached its popular peak in the 1930s. The emergence of the serialized format in new media such as radio^{xxii} and comic book was an important contributing factor, for its ongoing masculine adventure narratives required permanently isolated heroes who do not stray from their mission. Marital resolution at the episode's end, after all, would have entailed creating a new lone hero for the next episode. Moreover, the Depression years' economic hardship put a rather practical spin on sexual segmentation, defining the identity of respectable men and women in terms of work and marriage respectively. The exscription of the feminine enabled the respectable male to completely dedicate himself to work, just as it enabled the conventional superhero of the Golden Age, the Batman in particular, to exclusively focus on his superheroic responsibilities. The adventures of the hyper-masculine superhero can accordingly be read as a metaphor for the cutthroat job market of the Depression years, a time when the high-school weekly *Scholastic* warned:

“Every day brings nearer the time when you will be working for a living and fighting for a career in a competition that is as keen, as remorseless, as subtle as you will ever know” (quoted in Palladino: 19).

Sexual renunciation, then, further isolates the superhero who has already distanced himself from society by hiding his secret identity behind a costume or a mask, completing the formation of the monomythic hero.

Even a character as devoted to crime-fighting as the Batman, however, was judged by the creators to need some kind of company – and this judgment was at least in part motivated by narrative necessities. A completely socially isolated character, after all, has no reason to communicate, a situation that made it difficult to mediate the character’s thoughts to the reader. In 1940, Bob Kane, Bill Finger, and Jerry Robinson came up with a solution to this problem by introducing in the pages of *Detective Comics* #38 the first juvenile sidekick in the history of the genre, “an exciting new figure whose incredible gymnastic and athletic feats will astound you... a laughing, fighting, young daredevil... Robin the Boy Wonder.” During the Depression years, the pulpy adventure plots of then-popular boys’ magazines had featured heroic male teenagers showing off their skills in the imagined all-male world of the job market, the sports field, or the battlefield. The introduction of Robin the Boy Wonder redeployed this concept for the superhero genre, providing young readers with another point of entry for identification. The commercial success was immense. *Detective Comics* #38 almost doubled the title’s sales figures, and many other superheroes such as Green Lantern, the Sandman, the Human Torch, and Captain America would subsequently take on young sidekicks as well.

There are other dimensions to the introduction of the heroic sidekick, however; one of them is rooted in the hero’s psychology rather than in methods of narration or consumption. The Batman, it has been argued above, is conceived as a character

completely devoted to his heroic mission, a character who has sacrificed the sphere of femininity and intimacy for his monomythic ambitions. This complete devotion to the heroic mission socially isolates the male hero, creating the need for a different kind of social bonding: the goal-oriented, nonthreatening male bonding that depends on action rather than feeling. It is a relationship typical for masculine narratives, because it does not threaten masculine independence. Robin provides the Batman with social interaction, while never distracting him from his heroically hyper-masculine mission. Having lost his parents to crime much like the Batman, Robin is just as focused on crime-fighting as his adult partner, just as consistent in his desire to exscribe the feminine.

Reminiscent of the relationship between Jesus and God, Robin becomes the hero's symbolic son, "created" by the Batman in his own image. The notion of the father creating a son out of himself and not by sexual union hints at the Christian foundation of the exscription of the feminine that is at the very heart of the masculine myth. On behalf of their feminine sides, hero and sidekick share in the male bond of sublimated homosexual desire, entering a strictly goal-oriented relationship that does not make them vulnerable to the threat of the feminine.^{xxiii}

It is also of note that the Batman successfully recreates himself through education and training rather than through physical means, as for example Superman would be obliged to do for someone to inherit his powers. Robin's ability to become a superhero through the Batman's instruction and his own determination (in contrast to those who are born with their powers, such as Superman, or gain them by chance, such as Green Lantern or the Flash), reflects the hopes and dreams many Americans associated with the pronounced rise in high-school enrollment of the Depression years. Unable to find work, many teenage youth had remained in high school to wait out the economic storm, a trend that had been supported by government programs and vocational classes. Almost three in four fourteen-

to seventeen-year-olds attended high school by 1939; the percentage of seventeen-year-olds graduating high school had doubled from about twenty-five percent in 1929 to about fifty percent in 1940 (Palladino: 45). While adults increasingly viewed adolescence as a vocational training period and high school as a laboratory for future careers, the students themselves – removed from parental control to a higher degree than ever before – started developing a peer identity organized around the leisurely pleasures provided by swing music and dance. The relationship between the Batman and Robin mythically closes the gap between adult and adolescent notions of the high-school experience. Completely devoted to his studies and training, and in complete agreement with their adult-defined goals, Robin nevertheless, as will be expounded below, experiences his crime-fighting education as a fun-filled thrill ride.

Once the economy started recovering, advertisers and merchandisers were quick to identify the high-school crowd and its emerging peer culture as an attractive new market. They started developing the concept of teenaged youth as a group apart and a demographic in its own right, dubbing its members “teeners,” “teensters,” and finally in 1941 “teenagers.” The popular culture of the 1940s envisioned these “teenagers” as clean-cut and fun-loving individuals who ultimately did not pose a threat to adult authority, as eager to try out adult freedoms but willing to live by adult rules. Accordingly, Robin is always eager to experience the excitement of adventures that were previously the exclusive privilege of adult superheroes, but never questions the authority of his adult partner. Reminiscent once again of the relationship between Jesus and God, Robin submits to a patriarchal father figure who has no wife and therefore does not provide the symbolic son with an object to desire and to contest with the father. Robin’s complete obedience to the Batman thus confirms one of Western culture’s most powerful myths – the celebration of the son’s love for his father that poses no threat to patriarchal social order.

This conservative discourse is mythically reconciled with a subversive one; the pre-war Batman, just like the pre-war Superman, does not shy away from breaking the law when going after criminals. As a result, he repeatedly finds himself in conflict with the police. The police officers holding the hero accountable for breaking the law are generally shown to be a well-meaning but ultimately misguided lot, ignoring the imperfection and inefficiency of the justice system they represent. The Batman's attitude towards the law, on the other hand, is confirmed as appropriate by the structure of the stories: "If you can't beat them 'inside' the law, you must beat them 'outside' it – and that's where I come in!" (DC #43, 1940).

In *Detective Comics* #52 (1941), the justice system proves to be severely handicapped by procedural and institutional restraint, causing the threatened citizens to call for the superhero: "The police cannot help so we must turn to one who has aided us before." In *Batman* (BAT) #4 ("Public Enemy No. 1," 1941), a judge is shown to lack consideration for the individual case, only causing more suffering and crime with his cruel indifference. The narrator of "The Case of the Honest Crook" points out that the justice system is inevitably flawed by human error: "There is a time when justice is blind, when justice errs, the time the long arm of the law points an accusing finger at an innocent man" (BAT #5, 1941). In some cases, it is even corrupted. When Robin in *Detective Comics* #38 (1940) suggests sharing his knowledge with the police, the Batman replies: "The whole town is run by Boss Zucco. If you told what you knew you'd be dead in an hour."

Rather than questioning the Batman's disregard for the justice system, the stories prove the hero right by portraying the system as highly unreliable and insufficient. The superhero's very existence is, of course, based on the system's failure, for a functioning system would have no need for a vigilante. It is no coincidence that the concept of the super-powered crime-fighter was created during the Great Depression, as it was a reaction to the people's

frustration with the established system. Like the Superman of the pre-war years, the Batman of the time period is a social crusader. Millionaire Bruce Wayne may be a member of the establishment, but as soon as he puts on his costume and becomes a heroic figure he finds himself protecting the oppressed and challenging the status quo. In “The Crime School for Boys!!” (BAT #3, 1940), he saves a young small-time crook from pursuit by the police and then attempts to attack the roots of crime by providing a gym for underprivileged children and calling upon the mayors of all American cities to show more social commitment:

“We did ours, yes, but it’s up to other cities to do the same, build more playgrounds, gymnasiums – encourage youngsters to join school and church organizations. Do this and we will wipe out crime!”

Criminals are repeatedly portrayed as victims of a society that leaves them no other option: “I’m not really a crook. I – I just needed six dollars. My wife is sick. I needed medicine” (BAT #5, “The Case of the Honest Crook,” 1941). Former convicts are shown to depend on the help of the hero, because they have been unjustly rejected by employers who refuse to give them a second chance. The Batman himself has the utmost respect for reformed criminals who are able to leave their past behind and reintegrate into society, viewing their ability to change as “the best moral lesson there can be” (BAT #6, “Murder on Parole,” 1941).^{xxiv}

When fighting crime, the pre-war Batman acts just as violently as Superman, frequently using a gun (DC #32-33, 1939; DC #35, 1940) and killing his opponents (DC #28, 30, both 1939).^{xxv} Only once does he show signs of remorse afterwards: “This is the only time I was ever sorry to see a criminal die!” Conveniently, the criminal in this case with his final breath exculpates the hero from any wrongdoing by taking full responsibility: “I’m sorry I caused any trouble, I’m sorry... aaah!” (BAT #2, “Wolf, the Crime Master,” 1940). The

Batman jumps into action every bit as impulsively as his predecessor, enjoying the havoc he causes without giving it critical intellectual reflection. The narrator comments: “Jaws are cracked – grunts exploded – men go flying – the Batman and Robin are having fun!” (DC #41, 1940). The Batman himself expresses his joy like this: “Amazing how I always find time to enjoy myself, even in the tightest scrapes! Hello, Robin – what’s the score?” (DC #54, 1941).

Significantly, the conflict between the heroic social crusader and his opponents takes on the form of a parody of an institutional sports event, an event that has been described by John Fiske as “a depoliticised ideological celebration of physical labor in capitalism” (2004: 98). While the sporting male body in this sense becomes an active hegemonic agent, the hero parodying the sports event can be viewed as an agent of subversion. By exaggerating and spoofing certain elements of sports, the typical superheroic fight of the pre-war period recovers the offensive carnivalesque pleasures that the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie struggled so hard to appropriate and make respectable. What the sports metaphor does not do is take the violent edge off of physical conflict. According to Claude Levi-Strauss, North American mythology commonly casts the sports victory as the symbolic “killing” of one’s opponent (32).

Apart from regular criminals, the Batman and Robin have to deal with various “nutty scientists who want to rule the world” (DC #43, 1940) and who play an even more prominent role here than they do in the Superman titles. All of the early super-villains fall into the “mad scientist” category characterized by a “truly evil” combination of uncanny intellect, social seclusion, and an arrogant ambition for world domination.

The first super-villain outside this category is the Joker, introduced as a “master criminal” out to turn social order into chaos. At home, an elderly couple is listening to the radio, enjoying a peaceful evening: “My, isn’t it peaceful at home like this?” – “Nothing like it!

Hmmm static!” Then the Joker interrupts the program, causing havoc. He kills a few millionaires and a judge, then poses as the chief of police (BAT #1, “The Joker,” 1940). Very much like his heroic counterpart, the Joker intends to change society, but the society he has in mind is in diametrical opposition to the one the Batman intends to create. The Batman criticizes and confronts the system in order to overcome its imperfections, trying to create a society more just and orderly than the one the established authorities are able or willing to provide. The Joker, on the other hand, attacks and mocks the system in order to shake up the existing social structure and throw society into chaos. The Batman is a “control freak,” while the Joker is a force of chaos that craves acknowledgement.

Referred to by the narrator as “the master of mockery” (DC #64, 1942), the Joker wears extravagant purple clothes, applies makeup, reveals a “mask-like face” graced by lipstick, plays the violin (DC #45, 1940), and has his eyes set on diamonds and pearls (DC #60, 62, both 1942). By representing the feminine side of masculinity that the superhero thoroughly rejects, the Joker becomes the Batman’s homophobic nightmare. The Batman must fight his “evil” doppelganger in order to protect the excription of the feminine that is so central to his self-conception. Aggression is an effect of the ego’s struggle to maintain itself, and the conflict with the villain accordingly functions to reaffirm the hero’s identity.

Like all the other early super-villains, starting with the Ultra-Humanite, the Joker is no common criminal who can be sociologically reformed. His behavior is not rooted in flawed living conditions that could be improved. Instead, the Batman’s remote diagnosis in Batman #2’s “Joker Meets Cat-Woman” (1940) identifies a physical defect as the source of the Joker’s evil actions: “My plan is to abduct the Joker... Then we’ll take him to a famous brain specialist for an operation, so that he can be cured and turned into a valuable citizen.” Though medical attention, of course, ultimately proves unable to cure the popular super-villain, the story does not cast any doubt on the hero’s identification of a physical defect as

the source of evil disposition. In “Wolf, the Crime Master” from the same *Batman* issue, a well-behaved citizen falls down some stairs “to hit the floor with a sickening thud.” From one moment to the next, the injury turns him into a “master of evil.” The doctor confirms: “A bump to the head caused all that!” “Truly evil” disposition is again connoted to physical deficit, while heroism manifests itself in superior physicality.

The next unconventional super-villain is Cat-Woman, the first female villain.^{xxvi} She is a burglar and jewelry thief without any grand ambitions to rule or change the world, and the narrator calls her relationship with the hero a mere “contest” and “game”: “Who will be the victor in the game...?” (BAT #3, “The Batman vs. Cat-Woman,” 1940). A question more difficult to answer would be: what is at stake in this game between the Batman and Cat-Woman? A possible answer is the hero’s hyper-masculinity. Paving the way for the less vicious and more playful duels between hero and villain that would dominate the genre during the postwar years, Cat-Woman serves as the hero’s sporadic romantic interest. After the Batman has captured Cat-Woman for the first time, he intentionally lets her escape (BAT #1, “The Cat,” 1940). After their second meeting in *Batman* #3, he is almost in love: “What a night! A night for romance, eh, Robin?” The Golden Age Batman, however, quickly remembers to keep his priorities straight, exscribes the feminine and assigns Cat-Woman the less threatening role of the distant and impossible temptation. The superhero’s very identity, after all, depends on expelling every touch of femininity.

The Spirit

Historically significant for different reasons than Superman and the Batman is the Spirit, a character created by cartoonist Will Eisner. Eisner sold his interest in the successful Universal Phoenix Studio in the spring of 1940, when he was asked to participate in an experiment. He was offered the opportunity to create the lead feature for a new weekly

comic book anthology that, for the first time, was to be marketed as a newspaper insert, not autonomously like other comic books. From June 1940 on, *The Spirit Section*^{xxvii} appeared as a nationally syndicated Sunday newspaper insert. This unusual method of distribution would not have much impact on the industry's marketing strategies, as comic books would continue to be sold in their own right. Much more important was the role this experiment in distribution played in the long and still ongoing process of widening the medium's audience. Newspaper syndication gave Eisner the chance to create stories that were not, like all other comic books at the time, targeted predominantly at children. He remembers the situation like this:

“I was trapped in what to me was a comic-book ghetto where I would be turning out the same sort of formula adventure stories for the same level of reader indefinitely. Newspaper syndication would give me an adult audience and the opportunity to write and draw more sophisticated material. I would be able to realize my long-contained ambition to expand this medium beyond the existing parameters... I was free at last to innovate, experiment and address themes that I never would be able to do in comic books. I was at last writing for grownups” (2000a: 7-9).

To Eisner, overcoming the limitations that had been set by the medium's dedication to a young audience felt like the ultimate expression of freedom: “I had absolutely all the freedom in the world. I could do whatever I wanted, and all I was doing was trying to talk to adults” (Schutz and Brownstein: 69).^{xxviii}

Eisner took advantage of this freedom in various ways, most notably by experimenting with the language of comic books. Before “The Spirit” came along, for example, not much attention had been paid to page layout. Eisner's opening “splash pages,” designed to immediately grab the reader's attention and set the mood for the story, were unlike

anything that had been produced in comic-book format before, and the way they integrated the letters of the title into the opening scene in continuously inventive ways soon became a trademark of the series. The inside pages were constructed as distinct building blocks as well, serving the narrative of the story while at the same time displaying holistic panel arrangements in their own right. The pause that occurs when the reader turns the page could be accompanied by a shift of scene or change of time. Every element of Eisner's comic-book language – the narrative breakdown of the story as a whole, the coloring, the lettering, the page layout, the individual panel composition and shape, the drawing and writing style – is expressive and meant to evoke a certain mood, add to the character design, or achieve dramatic effect through timing. In part, it should be noted, this innovative development of the medium's language was a practical necessity enforced by the anthology format's spatial limitations. Every story had to be completed in only seven pages. Under such restrictive conditions, the expression of complexities would have been impossible without formal innovation.^{xxix}

Yet “The Spirit” did not only significantly contribute to developing a language for a medium still striving to adequately blend word and image and fulfill its narrative potential; it also set a precedent regarding creators' rights in the comic-book field. In his negotiations with Everett M. “Busy” Arnold, founder of Quality Comics and distributor of *The Spirit Section*, Eisner was granted ownership of the characters and stories he would create, even though they were officially copyrighted in Arnold's name. Eisner explains:

“The Spirit’ was to be copyrighted in Arnold’s name, but we had a contract saying that any time the deal broke up the entire property would revert to me. We were 50/50 partners. The reason it had to be published with his name on the masthead was because if I should go into the army and get killed, the syndicate feared that they would lose

newspaper clients. I wouldn't allow the syndicate to have the copyright.

In the opening negotiation, The Register and Tribune said everything they had was copyrighted by them. It was traditional. But I said, 'No way!'" (Schutz and Kitchen: 155).

A creator-friendly contract like this would remain very much the exception until the 1980s, when publishers of so-called alternative comic books started improving creators' rights.^{xxx}

In return for copyright ownership, Eisner made the concession of bowing to market demands by aligning his main character with the superhero genre. Still, the Spirit differs greatly from the conventional superheroes of his time. He wears no colorful costume but a blue three-piece suit and a tiny domino mask, which rarely even seems to be noticed by other characters. He is a man of no special powers, graced only by an extraordinary ability to absorb physical punishment. As a matter of principle, he does not even approve of the notion of self-administered justice that is at the heart of the superhero genre: "Citizens should not take the law into their own hands..." (2 Mar 1941). Last but not least, he is officially dead. The Spirit used to be known as Denny Colt, a regular police officer at the Central City Police Department. His life changes fundamentally when he is drenched in a fluid brewed up by the evil Dr. Cobra, appears to be dead, and is buried in Wildwood Cemetery, but two days later shows up at the doorstep of Police Commissioner Dolan, explaining that he was only comatose after all. No further explanations are given. Denny decides to remain officially dead, builds a hideout underneath his own fake grave, and fights crime as a costumed man of mystery unencumbered by the restraints of the law. Commissioner Dolan becomes his confidant and friend, Dolan's daughter Ellen his love interest.

The stories portray the Spirit as a necessary humane influence on the cold rigidity of law and order. Despite his friendship with Commissioner Dolan, the hero is critical of conventional law enforcement, particularly of the justice system's frequent failure to take personal circumstances into account: "Laws! Rules! ...Fine police commissioner you are! Here's a chance to save a life, but no!! You can't do it!!!!" (23 Mar 1941). The Spirit doubts the effectiveness of the justice system's authoritarian approach, decrying its lack of social commitment: "The law only punishes – it does not reform!" (30 Nov 1941). In a conversation with Dolan he finds fault with the authorities' tendency to deal with criminal activity on a superficial level, ignoring its roots: "I am saying that you're neglecting a disease... You can't make someone think like you by beating him up or jailing him!!" (25 May 1941). Commissioner Dolan himself sometimes regrets the law's anonymous approach and lack of sensitivity, wishing he could show mercy when the law calls for inconsiderate punishment: "No... I... I wish I could, but I've got to do my duty!" (18 May 1941). It is situations like these in which Dolan depends on his masked friend to operate outside the law and bring about a more understanding and humane kind of justice. Faced with juvenile delinquency, the Spirit saves a young criminal from the imprisonment demanded by law: "You're really a good kid!! This is your first mistake and if they jail you now – you'll only become a greater criminal!!!" (21 Dec 1941). The hero thus frequently finds himself in conflict with institutionalized law enforcement, causing the mayor to complain: "His frequent escapes... have made a laughing stock of the Police Force" (13 Oct 1940).

Not unlike DC's pre-war heroes, the Spirit is a humanist at heart: "You'll find that nearly everyone has a good streak somewhere in his make-up!" (2 Feb 1941). He believes in the dignity of the individual, in tolerance towards every member of society. Criminals are never condemned by the Spirit; in one story he even invites a small-time crook to celebrate

Christmas in his company (28 Dec 1941). Other stories illustrate the fatal consequences of the social marginalization of ex-convicts, instead promoting their reintegration into society (25 May 1941). In contrast to DC's pre-war heroes, however, the Spirit does not link his agenda to enthusiasm for physical violence. He can be described as a less impulsive and physical version of the social crusader that Superman and the Batman had established, one who is more theoretically inclined, intellectual, and self-critical. Frequently, for example, the Spirit questions common-sense assumptions, leading him to an awareness of his own fallibility that more conventional superhero stories do not demand from their heroes: "And somehow I forgot that crooks are human beings like you and me" (25 May 1941). To be sure, the Spirit sometimes comes across as rude, frequently participates in fistfights, and is certainly no pacifist, but his physical appearance and his use of physical force are not nearly as pronounced as those of his costumed contemporaries. He has no superpowers and his comparatively modest physique is covered up by a suit, not presented to the world in an intimidating fashion.

The fact that physicality is not as central to "The Spirit" as it is to conventional superhero texts and is renounced in its most violent forms means that some of the genre-typical points of entry for the reader are, while still present, not promoted as strongly by textual agencies as they usually are; these include the fantasies of instantly distinguishing oneself from the crowd, of a magical ticket to masculinity and power, of the invincibility of the country and its patriarchal system, of the dispensability of intellectual reflection and the indispensability of the Puritan past and its values. Moreover, the Spirit does not have the genre-typical plebeian alter ego that normally invites identification by fictitiously rearranging social rejection as an intentionally instigated, heroic masquerade. The Spirit's former identity as regular police officer Denny Colt does not serve as a mask meant to distract from the heroic identity, but is officially dead. While heroes such as Superman

socialize as underestimated commoners, the Spirit withdraws from the world to his hideout underneath Denny Colt's fake grave. Male empowerment fantasies that made standard genre fare particularly popular among pre-adolescent and adolescent boys, then, played a considerably less prominent role in "The Spirit." The series, after all, was not primarily targeted at boys, whose relationship with patriarchy's construction of masculinity tends to be particularly problematic, but at older male or female readers of newspapers who have already established some kind of social identity that provides them with a certain amount of power, and who therefore tend to be less or, in the case of female readers, not at all concerned with bridging the gap between the penis and the phallus. Instead, many readers of newspapers, like most adults of the time, viewed the conventions of the superhero genre with a certain level of amusement or even concern.

Well aware of his genre-untypical target audience, Eisner distanced his creation from various genre conventions that had initially established the medium as youth culture. Some elements that constitute these conventions are, as unfolded above, downplayed or altogether dropped, while others are parodied and ridiculed. Months before the Captain Marvel stories would start adopting a playful and humorous tone with great commercial success, Eisner introduced a distinct element of irony to the genre. This irony manifests itself in over-the-top character concepts, plotlines bordering on the absurd, and, above all, in highly stylized, cartoony artwork.

The subversive potential of stylized artwork becomes intelligible when Scott McCloud defines cartooning as "a form of amplification through simplification" and explains:

"When we abstract an image through cartooning, we're not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning,' an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (30).

McCloud elaborates that while the medium's traditional, more realistic drawing style emphasizes the appearance of the physical world that we perceive with our senses, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts. The comparatively realistic style employed by most artists of the superhero genre, then, lends itself to accentuating the image's physical aspects which are in superhero comics often linked to male empowerment fantasies, whereas the more cartoony style that would be adopted by the creators of *Mad* and later by most underground cartoonists creates a certain distance to this physicality, leaving room for intellectual reflection and subversion.

His cartoony style thus provided Eisner with the opportunity to put a more mature spin on the superhero genre, to obtain a certain amount of creative freedom under confining market conditions, and to express a personal point of view, while at the same time playing by the rules to a degree that was satisfactory to the publisher. In this sense, "The Spirit" represents a compromise between the desire to express an autonomous vision and the market demand to maintain a sufficient level of genre identification; it constitutes a negotiated response to some of the comic-book industry's inherent and unresolved tensions between dominant publishers and subordinate creators.

"Cartoony" and "realistic" drawing styles should not be understood as absolute antipodes. On the one hand, a cartoon is never the pure expression of creative vision, but is always based on existing codes, is always a meaningful mutation or extension of a realistic depiction. On the other, the genre-typical, more realistic style should not be confused with photo-realism but is usually limited to outlines with only a hint of shading, and is thus still cartoony to a lesser degree. What decisively distinguishes the cartoony from the realistic style is its willingness to display its own codes. While the more realistic drawing style typical of the superhero genre hides the stories' discursive nature in favor of pure and non-reflected fantasy, the cartoon introduces an awareness of the fantasy's preconditions and

preconceptions, thus opening up oppositional reading positions that subvert the fantasy's conventional uses.

The cartoony drawing style shares many characteristics with what Dick Hebdige defines as "subcultural style." According to Hebdige, subcultures

"display their own codes... or at least demonstrate that codes are there to be used and abused (e.g. they have been thought about rather than thrown together). In this they go against the grain of a mainstream culture whose principal defining characteristic... is a tendency to masquerade as nature... By repositioning and recontextualizing commodities, by subverting their conventional uses and inventing new ones, the subcultural stylist... opens up the world of objects to new and covertly oppositional readings (101-02).^{xxx}

Yet Eisner's "The Spirit" should by no means be mistaken for a product of subculture. Unlike subcultural style, the cartoony style of "The Spirit" did not subvert the dominant ideology of American mainstream culture, but the ideology of a superhero genre that itself had vigorously subverted American mainstream culture by directly targeting a young audience. "The Spirit" was ideologically much closer to the values of the mainstream than conventional superhero comic books. The fact that the series functions like subcultures in many ways derives from its "subcultural" status within the superhero genre. Subverting youth culture, that is, subverting a concept that was nothing short of revolutionary at the time, can hardly be described as a subcultural agenda when taking into account American culture of the 1940s as a whole.

Other Notable Superheroes

Encouraged by the success of Superman and the Batman, more publishers started entering the business from 1939 on, flooding the market with superhero titles in 1940. Despite the growing competition, DC successfully defended its position as market leader by sticking closely to the established formula. Apart from the definition of their superpowers and the colors of their costumes, there was initially not much that distinguished DC's new heroes from Superman's blueprint.

The Flash sped onto the comic-book scene in *Flash Comics* (FC) #1, cover-dated January 1940, where he is introduced by writer Gardner Fox and artist Harry Lampert as the "fastest man alive." In the hero's origin story Jay Garrick, college student, has an accident in a chemistry lab and inhales hazardous fumes which turn out to provide him with superhuman speed. Like his predecessors, he makes himself a costume and embarks on a crime-fighting career. His social consciousness is in high gear, like that of all DC heroes during the pre-war years. The Flash champions the "wronged" (FC #10, 1940), aids "the cause of those oppressed by the unscrupulous" (FC #4, 1940), and is "devoted to bringing about justice in a world filled with too much corruption and crime." The oppressors are either members of the economic establishment or politicians. A corrupt company "boss" and "some big-shot" business associate who ruthlessly and illegally "want to make a big profit" are confronted by the hero: "Just as I thought! The poor workers are being fooled by the higher-ups! Listen, men – don't be fooled by your bosses!" (FC #8, 1940). A "crooked Sheriff" (FC #13, 1941) and other treacherous politicians intending to "rob the schools" and exploit the poor are taught a lesson:

"I'm going to show you how the poor people live that you keep taxing to live in luxury! These poor people need money, yet you keep taking it

from them in high taxes – to spend on yourself! Aren't you ashamed?"

(FC #10, 1940).

The Flash himself outlines his political agenda like this: "I'll always work for the underdog against the strong! And for peace!" (FC #12, 1940). Like Superman and the Batman, this "defender of the weak" (FC #15, 1941) also expresses a preference for the reformation of small-time crooks over imprisonment (FC #15, 17, both 1941).

During his social crusade, the hero's absolute moral authority remains untouchable at all times, just like that of Superman and the Batman. His categorical inability to misjudge a situation is illustrated when the ambassador of a fictional country in crisis approaches him with the following request: "I want to send you there – as an army of one!" The Flash is not familiar with the country's state of affairs, but is galvanized into action by the ambassador's remarks, trusting them without reserve: "Me? ...Okay! –I'll do it! I'm on my way! So long!" (FC #12, 1940). Needless to say, the hero's mission is successful in every regard.

Two elements set the stories featuring the Flash at least slightly apart from the publisher's other output of the time. First, the physicality is not as pronounced as in the Superman and Batman titles. While the Flash occasionally "speeds faster than usual – creating a suction which pulls pedestrians after him" (FC #16, 1941), he generally does not indulge in his own powers as recklessly as most other pre-war heroes. He does not kill deliberately, though in the first issue of *Flash Comics* he is shown to accept the death of a criminal as a tolerable consequence of his own actions. Second, the narrator makes frequent attempts to provide scientific explanations even for the most fantastic scenarios, that is, to evoke the illusion of realism. This stands out as the stories' most striking feature and may be attributed to the writer's well-documented passion for science fiction.

Created by writer Bill Finger and artist Martin Nodell, the **Green Lantern** first appeared in DC's *All-American Comics* (AAC) #16, cover-dated July 1940, and got his own *Green Lantern* series in the fall of 1941. The origin story combines the mysticism of Captain Marvel's first appearance (see below) with the element of science fiction that characterizes Superman's origin. It introduces Alan Scott, a young engineer, as the only survivor of a train wreck caused by sabotage. When Scott discovers the mystical powers of the train lantern's emerald light, the magical lantern suddenly starts talking to him. It explains that in ancient times a meteor filled with a strange green fire crashed to Earth, and that fire has subsequently been transformed into this train lantern. According to the lamp, Alan is destined to fulfill its prophecy. He makes a power ring from the lantern's green energy field and puts on a costume. His powers are limited by the fact that the ring, source of the superheroic energies, needs to be recharged after twenty-four hours in order to be effective.

Like his precursors Superman and the Batman, the Green Lantern is needed because conventional methods of law enforcement have failed. The radio reports: "Police seem unable to cope with the situation!" (AAC #33, 1941). Only a superhero can save the day, and the narrator describes the Green Lantern's superior ways of dealing with "evil" phenomena like this: "Often will Alan Scott, the Green Lantern, bring to light certain evil which cannot be brought before a court of law... This is the evil in the heart of man" (AAC #32, 1941). In DC's pre-war tradition, the Green Lantern fights corruption in economy and politics and the exploitation of the poor. Also in DC's pre-war tradition, he recklessly enjoys his own violent ways whenever he gets a chance to use his powers: "I wish I had the time to muss you up a little, but I've got to save a man's life!" (AAC #19, 1940). He kills opponents without regret: "Well... that just about winds up Mr. Harkiss's evil career – and this case!" (AAC #25, 1941). While the hero's hyper-masculine physicality is celebrated by

textual agencies, physical disabilities again act as metonyms for criminal activity (AAC #28-29, both 1941).

The relationship between Alan and his secretary Irene closely resembles that between Clark and Lois in the Superman stories, as both Irene and Lois are in love with the hero persona while their feelings for the alter ego are of a far less passionate nature. Also just like Lois, Irene is frequently portrayed as too confident for her own good: “Watch out for any trouble... – remember, this gal is a bit headstrong! ...This little hot-head may get into trouble” (AAC #33, 1941). In moments like these, Irene relies on her hero coming to the rescue, much like Lois relies on Superman. The Green Lantern mythology further converges towards that of Superman when former engineer Alan Scott still in 1940 becomes a news reporter like Clark Kent, working for a radio station instead of a newspaper. This occupation is a helpful one for superheroes, as Alan points out in 1942’s *All-American Comics* #36: “I went... to get some information for the radio audience! –And I got plenty! (–and plenty more for the Lantern!)”

Fawcett Publications introduced **Captain Marvel** in *Whiz Comics* (WC) #2, cover-dated February 1940. In the origin story by artist C.C. Beck and writer Bill Parker, twelve-year-old Billy Batson is lured down an abandoned subway tunnel, where the boy receives superpowers from an ancient wizard. From this moment on, little Billy is able to heroically fight for justice once he has uttered “Shazam,” the magic word that transforms him into the superhero Captain Marvel. In his regular identity, Billy is a reporter, just like Clark Kent (and Alan Scott). Clark is employed by a newspaper, Billy by a radio station. As Captain Marvel, Billy has the wisdom of Solomon, the strength of Hercules, the stamina of Atlas, the power of Zeus, the courage of Achilles, and the speed of Mercury. While the early Superman stories never require their inerrant hero to be equipped with anything but physical powers, Captain Marvel receives and uses intellectual powers as well. However,

these abilities do not keep him from treating his opponents in a fashion very much like the other superheroes of the pre-war years, spontaneously giving them “a dose of [their] own medicine” (WC #9, 1940) when the opportunity presents itself.

Captain Marvel quickly became one of the most successful comic-book characters of the early 1940s, enjoying sales of about a million copies per issue and surpassing even Superman’s popularity for a while during the war. By 1941 he starred in his own series, *Captain Marvel Adventures* (CMA), and over the following years spawned spin-off titles like *Mary Marvel*, *Captain Marvel, Jr.*, and *The Marvel Family*. To explain this success, historians usually point to the outstanding clarity of C.C. Beck’s artwork as the title’s distinctive feature, the quality of which Harvey Kurtzman has described as “ultimately superior” to that of the competition: “Beck was capable of doing a very nice drawing – light, humorous, simple, and precise” (19). The gently humorous tone of the drawings, even though never as pronounced or resolute as that of Eisner’s “The Spirit,” increasingly characterized the writing as well, and by 1941 came to dominate all aspects of the stories. It was this humorous tone that distinguished the Captain Marvel canon, as it was more closely related to the whimsical wit of some newspaper strips from the 1920s than to the rough and grim crimefighting plots of the Superman comic books and their many duplicates. Even though textual agencies still primarily supported the male empowerment fantasies of straight reading positions (Billy Batson, after all, was the youngest alter ego the industry had yet produced), the stories’ light and non-confrontational playfulness lent itself to reading positions marked by ironical distance as well. Captain Marvel stories therefore appealed to a comparatively wide audience that included an increased percentage of older and especially female readers.

Another probable reason for the title’s outstanding commercial success, its generally conservative ideology, is rarely discussed in secondary literature. The concept for

Superman was originally conceived by Jerome Siegel in the early 1930s and finally saw publication in 1938. The concept for the Batman was developed late in 1938; the first Batman comic book was cover-dated May 1939 and actually published about two months earlier. Despite Roosevelt's so-called New Deal policies, intended to stabilize the American economy and provide the most basic social security, the country's economic situation did not improve significantly until 1939. The year 1938 was marked by another recession.^{xxxii} Superman and Batman were thus created under the profound influence of the Great Depression. The commercial success of these social crusaders convinced their publisher DC to by and large stick to this proven formula throughout most of 1940 and even into 1941, as copying the successful concepts and conventions seemed the safest way to create more bestsellers. While it is true that Superman was starting to devote some of his time to fantastic super-villains in 1940, he was also still a "champion of the oppressed" well into 1941, occasionally even during the war years after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Other DC heroes like the Batman, the Flash, and the Green Lantern also adopted this political agenda, as we have seen.

However, America's historical situation started to fundamentally change in 1939, and the kind of hero the public demanded changed with it. Social crusading began to feel out of place to many customers at a time when the economy was showing signs of recovery and the threat of a world war was becoming more apparent. While it took DC until 1941 to adapt its hero concepts to the new conditions, other companies were quicker to react to changing demands. Fawcett's Captain Marvel comics were among the first to mirror the new political, economic, and social climate. Realistically portrayed social issues were from the start all but non-existent in their pages, an approach attuned to the increasingly felt need to move past the strife of the Depression years. Gone is the criticism of the power bloc, gone the hero's conflict with the law. The new kind of hero, represented by Captain

Marvel from *Whiz Comics #2* on, presents a much more content persona that is at peace with the status quo and thus has no use for excessive violence. Unlike his contemporaries at DC, Captain Marvel does not fight or even encounter social injustice. When he for once happens to run into an ex-convict, the plot quickly proves the social outsider to be as guilty in the present as he was in the past (WC #11, 1940). Captain Marvel embraces the powers that be, linking his conservative agenda to patriotism: “Never let anyone persuade you to break the laws of our great country” (WC #5, 1940). Patriotism replaces social conscience as the central element of the hero’s agenda: “I’ll show these boshers how Americans fight” (WC #12, 1941).

Yet even though the Captain Marvel stories clearly reflect the growing public desire for a country free from internal conflict and united in patriotism, in 1941 Billy Batson, a.k.a. Captain Marvel, does not push for his country to enter the war but rather does everything in his power to avoid this step. Other representatives of the war-time hero, the Shield and Captain America in particular, promote a much more aggressive approach towards the war in Europe long before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Since Captain Marvel on the one hand is not confronted with realistic social issues and on the other hand does not yet get involved with the war, his opponents are made up almost exclusively of fantastic supervillains, a concept that would take hold of the genre from 1941 on. Dr. Sivana, another “mad scientist” in the vein of the Ultra-Humanite, is introduced along with the hero in *Whiz Comics #2* and becomes the hero’s arch-nemesis. Like his predecessors, he is conceived as a scientifically educated, selfish, and arrogant intellectual: “My science would rule the world except for Captain Marvel” (CMA #1, 1st story, 1941). Like them, he can never be reformed, as he freely decides to turn his powers against mankind and thus become a “mad scientist of destruction” (*Special Edition Comics #1*, “Captain Marvel and Sivana, the Weather Wizard,” 1940).

In mid-1939, Martin Goodman founded Timely Publications, the company that today is known as Marvel.^{xxxiii} The first comic book Goodman published was *Marvel Comics* #1, cover-dated November 1939, and it featured both **the Sub-Mariner** and **the Human Torch**. With its second issue, the series was renamed *Marvel Mystery Comics* (MMC). The complex design of both characters is worth a closer look as it differs greatly from that of all other comic-book heroes or villains of the Golden Age.

Created by writer-artist Bill Everett, the Sub-Mariner predates Wonder Woman as the first comic book protagonist whose origin is rooted in ancient myths about mysterious species sharing the Earth with humans, rather than in the popular pulp genres of science fiction (Superman) or crime (Batman). He lives in Atlantis, an underwater continent that was nearly destroyed by a human race that has lost respect for mythology and the balance of nature and instead focuses on “scientific investigations.” His mother has named him Namor, meaning “Avenging Son” in the Atlantean tongue. Namor’s upbringing has taught him to view humans as deadly enemies that must be destroyed in order to save Atlantis: “And so Namor, the Avenging Son, faces the surface men of the world, in what promises to be mortal combat!” (MMC #1, 1939). While the Atlanteans’ point of view is portrayed as comprehensible considering their tragic past, it is also shown as a distorted one based on misunderstanding. The idea of humans as a race of deadly predators bent on nothing but destruction is not confirmed by the stories.

Namor has not only an Atlantean mother, but also a human father, resulting in his unique mutations, such as his ability to breathe both in the sea and on the surface. Being half-human further complicates the Sub-Mariner’s agenda, as to him being at war with humans also means being at war with part of himself. All these circumstances turn Namor into a troubled rebel with a short temper who does not know where he really belongs. Humans learn to respect his noble and heroic sentiments, but at the same time fear him as a

powerful and often unpredictable threat. The Sub-Mariner is a tragically misguided character, an antihero years ahead of his time; comic-book protagonists with flaws in their makeup would become widely popular only in the 1960s.

When enraged, Namor refers to humans as “stupid idiots” (MMC #6, 1940), “numbskulls” (MMC #7, 1940) or “imbeciles” (MMC #8, 1940); he “slashes mercilessly” at them, kills innocents (MMC #1-2, both 1939), and “vows to destroy the human race” (MMC #8, 1940). Yet at other times he is portrayed as brave and faithful to his people and as a far too noble character to be placed alongside the conventional comic-book villains of the Golden Age. While villains like the Ultra-Humanite consciously harm society and freely choose to act in ways they themselves consider “evil,” the Sub-Mariner is a victim of circumstance who thinks of himself as a hero. Occasionally, he even understands “the error of [his] ways” (MMC #4, 1940) and saves the lives of humans (MMC #2, 1939; MMC #9, 1940). Already in early 1940 he feels the impulse to “fix this war” (MMC #4, 1940), though he quickly loses interest: “I’ve had enough of this confounded war! Perhaps I can do some good for the American people...” (MMC #5, 1940). While trying to do good, he clearly lacks the untouchable moral authority of the conventional comic-book hero of the Golden Age who is proven right by generic plot structures that never put his behavior in doubt.

The Sub-Mariner is the first super-powered comic-book character who is neither a clean-cut hero nor an obvious villain. Targeted at a slightly older audience than most of his costumed contemporaries, he is certainly the genre’s most morally ambiguous Golden Age character. Moreover, he has no secret identity that would allow him refuge from his state of constant conflict. While still offering young readers the genre-typical opportunity to project empowerment fantasies onto a social outsider, this (anti-) hero concept hints at the insecurities, loneliness, and emotional turmoil of early adolescence. After the Sub-Mariner

has failed in his mission to destroy mankind, his alienation grows as he is “suspended indefinitely from all active service” by the emperor of Atlantis. The narrator comments: “In disgrace, Namor leaves... – alone and friendless” (MMC #10, 1940).

In addition to “The Sub-Mariner,” Marvel launched Carl Burgos’ “The Human Torch” in *Marvel Comics* #1. Created by Professor Horton as “an exact replica of a human being,” the Human Torch is the first android to join the superheroic ranks. “Something went wrong with the figurings somewhere” (MMC #1, 1939), though, causing him to “burst into a super-hot flame every time he [comes] in contact with oxygen” (MMC #2, 1939). Initially, the Human Torch is a character every bit as ambiguous as the Sub-Mariner, a force of chaos who does not understand his own identity and powers: “I’m burning alive! – Why must everything I touch turn to flame?” Rampaging across the city in confusion, he “spreads terror through the city, as everything he touches turns into an inferno!” (MMC #1, 1939). Falsely charged with murder, he burns his way out of prison, “lets out a long, weird yell,” and “streaks through the town like a comet” (MMC #2, 1939).

Eventually, however, the Human Torch learns to control his abilities and puts them to heroic use. Even though he frequently still proves to be a “hot tempered lad” (MMC #8, 1940), he adopts the identity of Jim Hammond and decides: “I want to be a policeman!” He graduates from police school as “an honor student,” and the police captain is happy to welcome him to the force: “We feel that you can succeed where the police have failed!” (MMC #7, 1940). Taking advantage of his ability to fly and burst into flames whenever super-powers come in handy, police officer Jim Hammond, alias the Human Torch, confronts his opponents in typical pre-war fashion: “Here’s some of your own medicine!” (MMC #17, 1941). He is briefly “hunted by his fellow police officers as an arsonist because he burned down a block of old tenement houses infested with the black plague,” but quickly manages to clear his name to be reinstated on the force (MMC #12, 1940).

The Human Torch, then, does not remain the social outcast he was in the beginning. Instead, he becomes a member of the power bloc at a time when Superman and the Batman were still in conflict with it. Nevertheless, his unique artificial makeup, his less than clean record, his temper outbursts, his vanity, and his sometimes questionable sense of judgment clearly set him apart from the absolute moral authority attributed to the conventional superheroes of the Golden Age. It is ironic that the artificially created Human Torch, of all superheroes, displays human weaknesses hinting at the humanized hero concept that would revolutionize the genre from 1961's *The Fantastic Four* #1 on.

Created by writer Harry Shorten and artist Irv Novick, **the Shield** was introduced by MLJ Comics (parent company of Archie Comic Publications) in the pages of the January 1940 issue *Pep Comics* (PEP) #1. Six months later he receives co-title billing with the Wizard in *Shield-Wizard Comics* (SWC) #1. The Shield's alter ego, Joe Higgins, is, very much like Bruce Wayne, motivated by the traumatic death of his father to become a superhero. In this case, the father was killed by foreign spies during the First World War, causing Joe to "devote his life to shielding the U.S. government and its people from any harm." He puts on "a uniform of his own secret production" that looks like the American flag bent into the shape of a shield, is bullet- and flame-proof, and somehow provides him with "the speed of a bullet and the strength of a Hercules" (PEP #1). The Shield's abilities are described by the narrator in purely physical terms reminiscent of the depiction of Superman: "the power to perform extraordinary feats of physical daring and courage." His methods closely resemble those of most of his costumed contemporaries. Having been fired at with a ray gun, he takes control of the weapon, turns it around and shouts: "Here's a taste of your own medicine!" (PEP #2, 1940). His interrogations of criminals are as violent as they are effective, forcing a guilty suspect to cry out: "Ow! Awrrrk, I'll confess! Don't hit me again!" (SWC #1, 3rd story, 1940). Wisecracks like "A little something to remember me by!" or "A

clean strike!” (PEP #2, 1940) frequently accompany his kicks and punches. The more brutal the confrontations get, the more fun the hero has: “I’m really beginning to enjoy this, now!” (PEP #5, 1940). Like the pre-war Batman, the Shield shoots to kill, an intention the narrator considers particularly praiseworthy and describes in delight: “The Shield’s gun screeches a symphony of death!” (PEP #4, 1940).

While the Superman of the American pre-war years is a social crusader, though, the Shield takes an ideologically very different stand. He identifies the country, its population, and its culture with its government, thus accepting a totalitarian doctrine in the name of patriotism, freedom, and democracy. The narrator, in turn, equates this patriotism with a heroic dedication to “truth, justice and courage,” referring to the hero as “a symbol of loyalty and patriotism” and as a “byword for Americanism” (SWC #1, 1st story, 1940), thus implicitly denying the justification of any kind of opposition to the government. As a “G-Man,” the hero reports to a fictional version of real-life F.B.I. chief J. Edgar Hoover who also has the privilege of knowing his secret identity. The Shield’s actions, commissioned by the F.B.I., are always depicted as warrantable and effective. *Pep Comics* #1 hit the stands almost two full years before the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, predating the first appearance of Captain America by more than a year and heralding a new breed of hero brought about by the threat of war. Once the United States had officially entered the war, the Shield’s international enemies, commonly referred to as “rats” by the hero, are clearly identified as the Axis powers. In sharp contrast to American soldiers and officials, all representatives of hostile nations are portrayed as despicable and outrageous individuals.

The domestic world is also portrayed as free of any ambivalence; all Americans are shown as well-defined by their social status. The country’s powers that be are, in stark contrast to the genre’s pre-war conventions, generally depicted as trustworthy and virtuous. The

hero's "first official case" sets the tone when a member of the power bloc (by birthright) approaches him with the following monologue: "I'm Ruby Ingot, daughter of John Ingot, the big steel manufacturer... I'm sure my father's being held prisoner by the company guards... The company guards are all ex-convicts." The plot quickly proves the young lady's suspicions true to the last detail. The Shield goes into action, frees the "big steel manufacturer" and throws the ex-convicts back into jail where they belong (SWC #1, 2nd story, 1940). The status quo has been restored. Like these ex-convicts, other representatives of the margins of society generally do not prove to be trustworthy. When the Shield catches sight of "two tough looking characters," his suspicion is immediately aroused, only to be confirmed by the plot in the very next panel when "the two thugs strike" (PEP #2, 1940). The stories effectively declare society's existing hierarchies to be just and worthy of protection, an ideology that would soon come to dominate the superhero genre.

ⁱ For this chapter, the following comic-book reprint anthologies were used: Beck, C. C. et al. 1992, 1999; Brevoort, T. (ed.) 1997; Castiglia, P. (ed.) 2002; Eisner, W. 2000b-c, 2001b; Finger, B. et al. 1999, 2002; Fox, G. et al. 1991, 1993, 1997, 1998, 1999a, 2000; Kane, B. 1990, 1991; Kane, B. et al. 1992, 1995; Sedlmeier, C. (ed.) 2009; Siegel, J. and Shuster, J. 1989, 1990, 1991, 1997; Siegel, J. et al. 1994, 1998, 2001.

ⁱⁱ Stuart Hall argues that "the media's main sphere of operations is the production and transformation of ideologies." He uses the term ideology "to refer to those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and 'make sense' of some aspect of social existence" (1999b: 271). Building on Marxist tradition, John Hartley describes ideology as "the means by which ruling economic classes generalize and extend their supremacy across the whole range of social activity, and naturalize it in the process, so that their rule is accepted as natural and inevitable; and therefore legitimate and binding" (O'Sullivan *et al.*: 141). In the words of Douglas Kellner,

"ideology is...a rhetoric that attempts to seduce individuals into identifying with the dominant system of values, beliefs, and behavior. Ideology replicates their actual conditions of existence, but in a mystified form in which people fail to recognize the negative historically constructed and thus modifiable nature of their societies" (112).

Ideology, then, can be described as socially constituted meaning in opposition to individual ideas. Building on the insights of Antonio Gramsci, John Fiske reminds us that ideology can never completely succeed: “Ideology may work hard through social and textual agencies to produce conforming subjects, but it can never be totally successful” (1992a: 52).

iii This one-page origin story is an abridgement of a version that had initially been prepared in 1934 as a newspaper comic strip.

iv Pulp magazines replaced the dime novels as popular fiction’s preferred format early in the twentieth century. Printed on cheap pulpwood paper, they were marked, as Don Hutchison puts it, by “a delirious environment of irresistibly lurid covers, dynamic illustrations, worshipful letters and breathless fiction” (7).

v I use the term “Golden Age” to describe the period from 1938 to the late 1940s in the history of American comic books simply because it has been widely applied by comic-book historians and is widely understood by readers. It must be noted, though, that the concept is problematic. Most critics agree that comic books had not tapped their full “artistic potential” – a problematic and controversial concept in itself – by the late 1940s, and the medium would reach its peak of commercial success only in the first half of the 1950s. It was merely the superhero genre that was first conceived and most popular during the so-called “Golden Age” of comic books, and the fact that this concept is so widely applied today is testament to the persistent – albeit problematic – popular reduction of the comic-book medium to the superhero genre.

vi Antony Easthope expounds:

In the outside world the masculine myth tries to contain the feminine and the idea of woman by keeping it subordinated and in place. But it will never stay fixed where it is put. At the same time, inside the individual, the myth of perfect masculinity continues to be undermined. The other side of masculinity keeps coming back (1992: 111).

vii In 1933, Popeye’s popularity was further enhanced when the character was adopted by the Fleischer Studios into one of the Depression era’s most popular cartoon series, *Popeye the Sailor*.

A lesser-known comic strip featuring a superpowered hero is “Hugo Hercules,” but it was most likely no direct influence on the creation of Superman as it ran only very briefly and with little popular success for the *Chicago Tribune* from September 1902 to January 1903.

viii The popularity of the Tarzan character resulted in dozens of movie adaptations from 1918 on, a Broadway production in 1921, a comic strip by Hal Foster that was originally launched in 1929 and turned into a Sunday strip by 1931, and a radio program that aired from 1932 to 1936.

ix At <http://www.silverbulletcomicbooks.com/bobro/105695684482145.htm>, Bob Rozakis points out that Kryptonite was originally conceived by Jerry Siegel in an unpublished story from 1940 “as the ‘K-Metal,’ a fragment from the shattered planet Krypton whose radiation could instantly weaken, hurt and, with prolonged exposure, kill the Man of Steel.” According to Rozakis, Kryptonite was then officially introduced in

Superman radio serials from 1943 and 1945, before appearing in a 1948 movie serial. In 1949, it finally saw publication in comic-book form.

^x Superman's physical super-strength was complemented by his ability to fly, described by Don Hutchison as "one of the great obsessions of the Depression years" (185). Referring to the pulp magazines' aviation genre and its popular success with titles such as *Air Stories* and *Wings* during the 1930s, Hutchison describes the "romance of flying" as a form of escapism brought about by the harsh realities of the time:

"Things were pretty rough down on the ground but they couldn't be rosier up there in the endless vista of the skies – or so it seemed when you were stuck hopelessly on the ground. To weary job seekers and downtrodden laborers flying must have appeared a near miraculous escape from earthbound burdens, its practitioners akin to the gods as they rode the winds with white scarves fluttering in the slipstream" (185).

^{xi} For more examples of Superman intentionally killing his opponents, see the first three stories of 1940's *Superman* #4.

^{xii} Pierre Bourdieu ascribes subversive meaning to physicality as well, arguing that the industrial society's working class is only rich in its labor power. The body, particularly the extraordinarily strong and powerful one, is thus, according to Bourdieu,

"perhaps one of the last refuges of the autonomy of the dominated classes, of their capacity to produce their own representation of the accomplished man and the social world, that is being threatened by all the challenges to working-class identification with the values of virility, which are one of the most autonomous forms of their self-affirmation as a class" (quoted in Fiske 2004: 96).

^{xiii} For another example of Superman fighting a "corrupt practitioner of law," see the final story of *Superman* #8 from 1941. The vulnerability of the justice system is also illustrated by a judge who is being blackmailed in the second story of *Superman* #9 from the same year.

^{xiv} In an attempt to calm labor unrest, the Wagner Act of 1935 had set up a National Labor Relations Board, giving unions legal status. However, the system remained unstable and was shaken by a wave of strikes between 1936 and 1938. The spirit of labor militancy and rebellion would only be slightly weakened once war production ended the Great Depression and reduced unemployment, bringing about increased wages while shifting public attention away from inner conflicts towards outside enemies.

^{xv} For more examples of Superman taking aim at corporate greed, see *Action Comics* #14 and #18 (both from 1939).

^{xvi} Roland Barthes describes the popular demonization of intellectual abilities as

“the old obscurantist myth according to which ideas are noxious if they are not controlled by ‘common sense’ and ‘feeling’: Knowledge is Evil, they both grew on the same tree.”

As “common sense” denies the discursive nature of the dominant sense of reality, claiming that it has no alternative, the reactionary implications of this obscurantist myth are obvious. Barthes expounds that

“this old romantic couple, the heart and the head, has no reality except in an imagery of vaguely Gnostic origin, in these opiate-like philosophies which have always, in the end, constituted the mainstay of strong regimes, and in which one gets rid of intellectuals by telling them to run along and get on with the emotions and the ineffable” (35).

^{xvii} A psychological interpretation of the hero’s inability to conclusively defeat the villain can also be presented. Psychoanalysis, in the words of Antony Easthope, “describes the subject as split between conscious and unconscious such that the I becomes possible only because the it remains its repressed other” (1991: 133). It makes perfect sense, then, that the villain exemplifying the Other can never be ultimately defeated. The repressed, after all, always returns.

^{xviii} In *Action Comics* #23 (1940), Luthor is mentioned for the first time under the name we know today, Lex Luthor.

^{xix} In addition, Fiske challenges the difference commonly believed to exist between representation and escapism. He suggests that this supposed difference “serves the interests of the dominant by devaluing many of the pleasures of the subordinate” and argues:

“Underlying this is the notion that representation has a social dimension, whereas escapism is a merely personal flight into fantasy. Such an easy dismissal ignores the fact that escapism or fantasy necessarily involves both an escape from or evasion of something and an escape to a preferred alternative: dismissing escapism as ‘mere fantasy’ avoids the vital question of what is escaped from, why escape is necessary, and what is escaped to. Asking these questions gives escapism or fantasy as strong a sociopolitical dimension as representation, and begins to erode the difference between the two” (1992a: 317).

^{xx} For adolescent readers, Gerard Jones argues, entertainment such as superhero comics functions to replace physical play which is socially restricted to younger children. According to Jones, a popular medium like that of comic books enables adolescents who feel too old to play openly “to manipulate and master the ideas and feelings that concern them until they feel ready to grapple with them in reality” (155). He is in agreement with Loeb and Morris who insist that the superhero fantasy should not be prematurely equated with escapism, arguing that it can very well have an encouraging and inspirational effect on the reader for dealing with the upcoming challenges of everyday life:

“By showing us how even very powerful people have to fight and struggle and stick to that fight in order to prevail, they help us deal with the fears that we all face concerning our own prospects in the world. So, it will be tough. So what? We can do it” (17).

Loeb and Morris elaborate:

“All of us have talents and powers. If we can follow the superheroes in not allowing what is low and inferior to interfere with our development and use of those gifts, we can bring a little of the superhero mindset into our own lives” (19).

^{xxi} According to Richard Dyer, the heroic determination to succeed and the climactic display of masculine performance parallel the importance attributed to the climax in masculine sexuality. A discursive reading of the superhero genre can therefore find structural similarities to the masculine genre of pornography (Fiske 1992a: 215).

^{xxii} In 1933, a Detroit radio station debuted *The Lone Ranger*, a serial that would run until 1954 and starred a permanently isolated hero not yet of superheroic proportions, but enabled by his incomparably fast horse to perform his redemptive task.

^{xxiii} This disburdening function of male bonding shines through when creator Bob Kane points out that Robin changed the tone of the stories:

“Robin lightened up the mood of the strip and he and Batman would engage in punning and badinage as they defeated their adversaries. The brightness of Robin’s costume also served to brighten up the visuals and served as a counterpoint to Batman’s somber costume. More significantly, the addition of Robin gave Batman a permanent relationship, someone to care for, and made him into a fatherly big brother rather than a lone avenger” (Kane with Andrae: 46).

^{xxiv} It should be noted, however, that while stories frequently explain criminal activity as the product of a damaging social environment, they do not show any kind of realistic insight regarding patients of mental institutions. Instead, these patients are consistently demonized. When some of them escape the “City Insane Asylum” in *Batman #1* (“Professor Hugo Strange and the Monsters,” 1940) a pipe-smoking Bruce Wayne comments condescendingly: “Criminals, maniacs, and [Doctor] Strange can only add up to one thing – something new in crime – something fantastic and terrible – very terrible!!” His apprehension is immediately confirmed by the plot developments.

^{xxv} For more examples of the Batman killing his opponents, see *Detective Comics #35* and *Batman #1* (“Professor Hugo Strange and the Monsters”) and *#2* (“The Case of the Clubfoot Murderers”), all from 1940.

^{xxvi} She is originally introduced as the Cat (*Batman #1*), but soon becomes known as Cat-Woman (*Batman #3*, both from 1940).

^{xxvii} Originally, this newspaper insert was called *The Comic Book Section*, but it was changed to *The Spirit Section* as soon as it became clear that Eisner's "The Spirit" was the anthology's most popular feature.

^{xxviii} The way *The Spirit Section* was marketed positioned this particular comic book closer than others to the related medium of comic strips, but this relative closeness is based on the marketing strategy alone. Eisner himself never had doubts about the insert's identity: "I really grew up in comic books. My newspaper experience was really as a comic book artist" (Schutz and Kitchen: 115). Newspaper syndication was a mere marketing tool, providing Eisner with the opportunity to explore the artistic potential of the comic-book medium.

^{xxix} Scott McCloud argues that Eisner decisively contributed to the development of "a unified language of comics," a language able to overcome the limitations brought about by the factory-like division of the creative process, a language whose "words and pictures are like two sides of one coin." Eisner's cartoony, rather abstract artwork on the one hand, and his relatively bold and unornamented words on the other, McCloud suggests, require similar levels of reception and perception.

"Pictures are received information. We need no formal education to 'get the message.' The message is instantaneous. Writing is perceived information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language. When pictures are more abstracted from 'reality,' they require greater levels of perception, more like words. When words are bolder, more direct, they require lower levels of perception and are received faster, more like pictures" (49).

^{xxx} To this day, however, most mainstream comic books published by the market leaders DC and Marvel are corporate products owned by the companies; their creation process remains characterized by division of labor. When negotiating his contract in 1940, Eisner profited from the fact that he was dealing with a publisher familiar with newspaper-strip production but new to the field of comic books. Some of the more successful comic-strip cartoonists had fought for creators' rights in the newspaper field early in the twentieth century, paving the way for Eisner.

^{xxxi} In sharp contrast to Adorno and Horkheimer, who viewed all mass cultural style as a mere indicator of "obedience to the social hierarchy" (38), Dick Hebdige interprets subcultural style as the figurative expression of a "fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second-class lives" (132). Style is thus no longer considered a reliable agent of the power bloc, but becomes a potential tool of subversion. Both perspectives agree, however, on the basic relevance of the status quo and its modes of production for the development and function of style.

^{xxxii} The recession – caused by Roosevelt's poorly-timed effort to balance the national budget – started in the fall of 1937 and continued through most of 1938. In 1938, Roosevelt abandoned his effort to balance the budget, instead launching a \$5 billion spending program in order to increase mass purchasing power. The new program was beginning to show results in 1939, when it reached a new dimension during the country's initiative to build up its armed forces.

^{xxxiii} The company was originally named Timely, but I henceforth use the company's modern name Marvel in order to avoid confusion.

Chapter 4ⁱ

Adjusting the Superhero, 1941 to 1945:

Textuality, Reflexivity, Ideology

Reflexivity and Marketing

Acting on the business maxim that success breeds success, DC did not miss an opportunity to trumpet its product's growing popularity. The first issues of *All Star Comics* and *Wonder Woman* were celebrated as "complete sell-outs" in the titles' third (1941) and second (1942) issue respectively, the DC titles in general were advertised as "the favorite comic reading of millions of Americans" in *Superman #23* (1943), and Superman himself was pleased to observe in *Action Comics #62* (1943): "It seems I'm made of lasting material."

The popular appeal of Superman was rapidly transcending the boundaries of the comic-book medium. A newspaper strip and a nationally syndicated radio program starring Superman had been launched in 1939, followed by a Paramount-produced serial of animated Superman films in 1941. By 1943, the Batman was following suit as the character received a newspaper strip and a film serial of his own. Superman- and Batman-related merchandise such as toys, clothing, and food items were flooding the market. Both of these multi-media marketing campaigns were supported by write-ups in the comic books themselves. In *Superman #19*'s "Superman, Martinee Idol" (1942), for example, as Lois Lane and Clark Kent are about to enjoy an animated Superman feature in the cinema, Lois proclaims that she "can hardly wait to see the cartoon." Clark is happy to report: "I hear that Paramount Pictures did an outstanding job." After Bruce Wayne and Robin have watched a film about themselves on the big screen in *Batman #9*'s "The Case of the Lucky Law-Breakers!" (1942), Bruce jokingly turns to his young partner: "Funny, I never realized

before, how photogenic you are!” Robin returns the compliment: “And you – you’ll be making Clark Gable look to his laurels!” The cover of *Batman* #10 (1942) features the Batman and Robin standing on top of a comic-book page that is no longer able to solely contain characters that had become widely recognized icons of popular culture. Correspondingly, the cover of *Superman* #21 (1943) takes the appearance of a billboard that is in the process of being painted by workers on a platform, symbolically depicting the transition from comic-book character to multi-media phenomenon.

As the variety of Superman products rose from 1939 on, a growing number of adults became aware that comic books were no longer merely reprinting newspaper strips. Taking a closer look at what their children were so excited about, they stumbled upon stories celebrating their heroes’ emphatic disrespect for authority as well as their violent methods. To make things worse in the eyes of adults, DC routinely drew on Freud’s concept of identification as a psychological activity beyond the reader’s conscious control to promote its stories as an overwhelming and irresistible thrill ride destined to seduce readers to submerge their own identities into those of the violently rebellious heroes: “A warning: the thrilling exploits of the Batman and Robin in the current issue of *Detective Comics* will have you holding onto your chair!” (*Batman* #2, 1940). While this kind of promotional hype was likely to create additional excitement among young readers, parents who took for granted their right to control their children’s leisure activities were alarmed by the notion of mass-produced empowerment fantasies being naturalized into the desires of their children.

In an attempt to counter such anxieties and appease critics, by 1940 the comic books published by DC started incorporating messages, primarily targeted at parents, that promoted the circulation of selected adult-friendly meanings and were designed to pass the social crusaders off as compatible with adult conceptions of desirable role models for children. In the pages of *Detective Comics* #43 (1940), for example, the Batman casts Robin

as a role model for youngsters who have fallen prey to the temptations of slot machines: “...if you want to keep my respect you’ll stop playing the machines! Robin doesn’t. So why should you?” The boys immediately and without reserve follow Robin’s example: “Gee, if Robin the Boy Wonder don’t, I guess that’s good enough for us! We’ll tell all the kids!” Likewise, Superman urges his readers in the opening story of *Superman* #5 (1940) “not to throw their money away wastefully into slot-machines!”

In addition to the regular narrative, the *Superman* series ran features titled “Superman’s Tips for Super-Health” or “Attaining Super-Health: A Few Hints from Superman!,” full-page comic strips starring fictional young readers inspired by the stories to exercise regularly, to walk “head high, shoulders back, chin in and chest out,” to eat “a well-rounded diet,” and to generally listen to their parents’ advice: “Superman says we should eat what our parents tell us, because they know best!” (#3, 1940). Turning the actual content of the stories published before the summer of 1941 upside down, such features trumpeted the adult-friendly message that superhero comic books did not question but rather fortified adult authority.

Early *Batman* issues took a similar tone. A self-contained panel from *Batman* #1 (1940) introduced a fictional group of young admirers of Robin the Boy Wonder calling themselves “Robin’s Regulars” and declaring their unshakable commitment to what is referred to as “ROBIN’s Code,” a set of status-quo-friendly guiding principles whose combined first letters make up the young sidekick’s name: readiness, obedience, brotherhood, industriousness, nationalism. Furthermore, respect for previous generations is displayed by a member of “Robin’s Regulars” who is depicted “helping an old man across the street,” and the narrator invites the real reader to follow his example: “Why not become one of ‘Robin’s Regulars?’ No button or badge is needed... Be a ‘Robin Regular’ by being regular!” Linked by “ROBIN’s Code” to the celebration of values such as obedience and nationalism, “being regular” could

easily be translated into “bowing to adult authority.” Batman stories, in other words, were portrayed as inspiring in young readers submissiveness to the adult-controlled status quo, a suggestion in sharp contrast to the actual story content prior to the summer of 1941.

Batman #3 (1940) features a full-page address to the readers in which the hero casts his own controversial crime-fighting methods as his patriotic duty:

“There’s nothing we like better than to crack down on the distasteful denizens of the underworld. Why? Because we’re proud of being AMERICANS – and we know there’s no place in this great country of ours for lawbreakers.”

Patriotism was widely embraced by adults as the country’s entry into World War II became more likely. The Batman even claims that “all these new adventures of mine and Robin’s” are not primarily intended to entertain, but to help readers become “useful citizens” by illustrating the moral that “crime doesn’t pay”:

“Sure, it may seem that lawbreakers DO get away with breaking the law. Some may get away with it longer than others. But in the end, every crook gets what’s coming to him – and that means plenty of trouble with the law! Robin and I hope that our adventures may help to ‘put over’ that fact. We’d like to feel that our efforts may help every youngster to grow up into an honest, useful citizen... And not only must you guide your OWN life in the proper channels – you must also strive to be a good influence on the lives of others. If you do all this, if you are definitely on the side of Law and Order, then Robin and I salute you and are glad to number you among our friends!”

Before DC introduced the Editorial Advisory Board in the summer of 1941 to control story content, such instances of authoritarian, establishment-friendly indoctrination were very much at odds with the actual stories' fun-loving and insubordinate spirit. Clearly, they were designed to appease concerned adults.

Despite DC's efforts to improve the cultural and social status of its product, the position of comic-book critics was strengthened by historical events. Already long before the Japanese attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the threat of a world war had started changing the national mood, shifting the focus away from domestic social issues and internal conflicts toward a potential external enemy. Military production between 1939 and 1944 almost doubled the nation's economic output. The labor force was growing, unemployment dropping. Both the improving economy and the common fear that portrayal of inner strife might hurt national unity and thus the military effort found expression in an ideological shift toward more conservative values in all popular media during the early 1940s. The heroes that a society chooses to make popular are those figures that best embody its dominant values, and the dominant values of American society were rapidly changing.

In 1940, DC reacted to these developments by hiring a new editor in chief, Whitney Ellsworth. His first major task was to fundamentally renegotiate the "struggle for meanings" inherent in the publisher's product, a struggle involving subordinate creators and the dominant power structures, young readers and their parents, popular demand and elitist protest, domestic social ambitions and international political necessities. In view of the immediate threat of a world war, Ellsworth decided to align his employer's product with the more conservative output of other popular media by controlling the stories' polysemic potential and imposing an ethical template onto their ambiguous heroes, that is, by reducing the multi-accentual to the uni-accentual. In the summer of 1941, Ellsworth

introduced an Editorial Advisory Board to advise and approve the content of all DC comic books. The new editorial board required all staff writers and artists to tone down the violence and establish the heroes as members, not critics, of the status quo. Even after America's entry into the war, acts of social crusading or violent rampaging occasionally bypassed the editors' censorship and made it into publication, but by and large the internal code succeeded in remodeling the company's comic-book heroes. Oppositional readings did not become a complete impossibility, but they became decentered and marginalized. The texts now primarily invited the readers to identify with the power bloc and sympathize with the status quo.

Another strategy designed to boost DC's image in the eyes of concerned adults after the summer of 1941 was to highlight its product's affinities with highbrow media such as theatre (*Superman* #24, "Perils of Poor Lois!", 1943) or literature (cover of *Green Lantern* #2, 1942), grouping it with cultural products that had been embraced by official culture. The relationship to the medium most closely related to the comic book, the newspaper strip, was more ambivalent. The newspaper strip still lacked the social and institutional legitimization of official culture, yet the times in which the comic strip's subversive humor had sparked furious attacks by self-proclaimed guardians of "decency" and "good taste," attacks similar to the ones the comic book was faced with in the early 1940s, lay more than a decade in the past. While the narrative empowerment of the image continued to be scorned by the cultural elite, the conservative values propagated by the adventure strips of the 1930s had managed to appease most critics. The comic-book medium, to be sure, was rapidly evolving from its predecessor during the early 1940s, developing its own target audience, language, conventions, and ideological leanings. Significantly, publishers began referring to their products as "comic books" (*Batman* #5, "Book of Enchantment," 1941; *All-American Comics* #27, 1941), no longer as "comic strips" or "adventure strips" as was

still common during the late 1930s (*Action Comics* #1, 1938; #12, 1939). Nevertheless, the comic book's derivation from a medium that had been rewarded for its ideological concessions with the acknowledgment of its right to exist was too valuable a marketing tool to give up that quickly, and the comic books of the early 1940s are accordingly marked by the attempt to have it both ways: to profit economically from their emancipation from the comic strip, and at the same time to retain the prestige-enhancing assets of their formal relationship to it. In this context it becomes understandable that the comic books of the early 1940s, even when portraying themselves as the legitimate successor of the comic strips, strictly avoid the disclosure of the industry's assembly-line production methods, the dissatisfying situation of its creators, and its position at the very bottom of the cultural hierarchies. Meanwhile the drastically different comic-strip market is displayed in some detail on the comic-book page: the prestigious and financially rewarding position of its popular creators, the diversity of its audience, and its influential role in the newspaper market (*Action Comics* #55, 1942; *Superman* #18, "The Snake," 1942).

Superman

The new Superman of *Action Comics* (AC) and of his own *Superman* (SUP) series is a law-abiding super-policeman who has come to terms with the powers that be. American society is now largely presented as a melting pot free of class or ethnic conflict. The American Dream is alive and well: "This is one way to become successful – start at the bottom and work to the top!" (AC #56, 1943). Gone are the hero's clashes with institutions; the police force has embraced the hero: "To think we once considered him outside the law!" (SUP #20, "Lair of the Leopard!," 1943). Siding with a billionaire (AC #40, Oct. 1941) and protecting wealthy celebrities (AC #57, 1943), Superman now defends the status quo. Criminal activity is no longer considered in its social context, because issues such as poverty and repression are not broached anymore. The line between the "good" and the "bad" guys

is now clearly drawn. Criminals simply appear to be born on the wrong side of that line, as their “utterly ruthless features” (SUP #17, “The Human Bomb,” 1942) adequately define them.

It should be noted, though, that the social crusader of the Depression years has not completely disappeared and occasionally resurfaces to fight for a “free vacation spot for kids” (SUP #16, “The World’s Meanest Man,” 1942), to convince a boy “headed for reform school... to go straight,” to prevent a “crooked lawyer” from stealing the inheritance from a widow (SUP #21, “The Ghost of Superman!,” 1943), or to support a resident of “Metropolis’ slum section” (SUP #22, “The Luck of O’Grady!,” 1943). Such elements of resistance against censorship are part of popular culture’s inevitable struggle for meanings, as there is always an element of popular culture that escapes hegemonic forces and allows for the production of social meanings that are in the interests of the subordinate.ⁱⁱ In real-life politics, the propaganda machine of the war proved just as unable to entirely repress civil commotion, as union membership rose and labor unrest continued during the war years.

A story that vividly illustrates the ideological shift from the Depression to the war years is “A Modern Robin Hood” from 1943’s *Superman* #22. Here, the superhero’s updated agenda is contrasted with that of Robin Hood, archetypal English folk hero of the medieval era marked by his status as outlaw and social crusader as a congenial predecessor of Superman’s pre-war persona:

“Many, many years ago, there dwelt in Sherwood Forest a merry robber band led by Robin Hood. These self-appointed avengers of injustices would sweep down on the undeservedly rich, rob them of their ill-gotten gains, and turn the proceeds of the robberies over to the deserving poor. That type of justice may have been necessary in those dark days, but in

the present-day world any form of thievery, no matter how lofty the motives inspiring the crime, is frowned upon.”

When a modern reincarnation of Robin Hood appears in the streets of Metropolis to “rob the unjustly rich [and] aid the poor,” he is cast as a tragically misguided character blind to the fundamental advances of society, realizing only before his inevitable death: “I-I was a fool to try to... work outside the law. If... if I wanted to help others... I should have joined the police force...” In addition to the character’s late comprehension, Clark Kent (alias Superman) formulates the story’s “official” moral in the final panel: “If ever anyone illustrated that crime doesn’t pay, the modern Robin Hood did!” Lois Lane agrees: “It’s a pity he didn’t turn his desire to help others into more constructive channels... the way Superman does!”

This clear-cut moral, however, is subverted by remarkable narrative inconsistencies. Even though self-appointed avengers of injustices are declared to have become obsolete and uncalled-for “in the present-day world,” the modern Robin Hood’s unlawful enterprise initially manages to thwart the corrupt plans of a character described by the narrator as an “unscrupulous property owner,” succeeding where Superman and the police have apparently failed. In fact, it is not his status as an outlaw that eventually leads to his downfall, but the rather abrupt introduction of an additional plot element, a narrative crutch that constructs the outlaw’s death as a case of poetic justice. Without ever having strayed from his social commitments before, the modern Robin Hood suddenly reevaluates his motives: “I’ve stolen hundreds of thousands... could have kept it all for myself... but gave it all away. Maybe I’ve been a sap... outwitting the law is a cinch... why shouldn’t I make it pay...??” The dutifully trumpeted moral that any unlawful activity must by all means be condemned, a moral that implicitly explains the transformation of Superman from free-

wheeling social crusader to law-abiding super-policeman, is thus not consistently supported by the plot.

In contrast to Superman, the character of Lois Lane did not need to be redefined in order to satisfy the criteria of the in-house code. Just like during the Depression years, she is still hopelessly in love with Superman while rejecting his alter ego: “Oh, Clark! ...I can never give you my hand... My heart belongs to Superman! (Sigh) He’s wonderful!” (SUP #24, “Perils of Poor Lois!,” 1943). She still “looks on helplessly” (SUP #21, “The Four Gangleaders,” 1943) whenever she gets into mischief, waiting for Superman to “play nursemaid” (AC #54, 1942). Clark confirms that the plot device has become a familiar routine and informs Lois: “You should know by this time that Superman always saves you in the nick of time!” (SUP #19, “Superman, Martinee Idol,” 1942). Describing Lois as “contrary, mule-headed, aggravating... and yet... swell” (AC #54, 1942), Superman still appreciates the fact that she continues to provide him with the opportunity to confirm his own hyper-masculinity by both rescuing and rejecting her, by mastering both the physical world on the outside and his own feminine tendencies on the inside, by exscribing the feminine. When Lois in *Action Comics* #61 (1943) falls in love and wants to marry another man, Superman’s sensibilities are profoundly offended:

“Lois – about to marry – marry someone else... This is something I never expected! I – I’ve got to think it out! I’ve known Lois for years – never declared my feelings – took her for granted... It never occurred to me that some day she might marry someone else... I can’t let her go like this! She means too much to me! ...Somehow, I must win Lois for myself – but how?”

It is the narrative function of Lois Lane, as has been argued above, to define the hero as a personification of masculinity. As the cultural construction of the masculine ego necessarily

remains fragile and, in the words of Antony Easthope, “falls under the shadow of paranoia” (1992: 44), it is in need of constant fostering and nurturing, that is, in the world of Superman, of a damsel in continuous distress. Superman’s fear of losing Lois, then, must be understood as the fear of losing proof of his own hyper-masculinity.

The fascist Axis rulers insisted on women’s subordination, limiting their role in society to that of mother and housekeeper. In the United States, many women were entering the work force as a result of the absence of men during World War II, but they were earning significantly less than men doing similar jobs and would not see much improvement in this regard until the Equal Pay Act of 1963. Moreover, women were denied policymaking positions in the War Manpower Commission, even though they were the ones making the arms industry’s mass production possible. The first great movement of women from the home to the workplace was not accompanied by a significant improvement in women’s rights. Shortly after the war, the marriage rate went up drastically and most women returned to the role of wife and mother.

The portrayal of Lois Lane, determined by a predominantly phallogocentric textual conception of gender relations, mirrors the refusal of the patriarchal status quo to accredit women’s crucial role in war production with advancing women’s opportunities and rights. Whenever Lois attempts to act independently (“I’ll cover this on my own!”) and break free from the role patriarchal society has assigned to her, trouble soon follows (Clark: “That girl’s headed for trouble!”), requiring her male hero to come to the rescue (SUP #20, “Destroyers from the Depths,” 1943). When Lois expresses pride in her work (“How did I score the scoop? By diligence, my boy!”), Clark is quick to remind her: “Of course, you had a little aid from Superman?” Lois has to admit: “Yes. A little.” Clark, meanwhile, knowingly winks at the reader (AC #56, 1943).

In the story “The Snake” from *Superman* #18 (1942), Lois has an opportunity to leave her Lovelorn column behind for a more influential editor position, but quickly has to accept that she is just not cut out for higher tasks: “And you can have your job back – with pleasure. Just one day at an editor’s desk was too much for me!” Clark Kent even doubts her fitness for the position of news reporter: “Better stick to your Lovelorn column, Lois, and leave the news reporting to me.” In *Action Comics* #54 (1942), he commands: “Now stick to your typewriter!” However, Lois insists on being a reporter, behaving “as stubborn[ly] as ever” in this matter and thus time and again relying on Superman, as the hero himself puts it in “The Snake,” to save the day “before Lois has an opportunity really to get into trouble.”

Textual agencies, then, still tend to resolve the struggle between the discourses of feminism and patriarchy to patriarchy’s advantage. Yet the very acknowledgement of this struggle indicates that the patriarchal status quo can no longer be taken for granted, and can no longer hide its discursive nature. What is more, patriarchal overtones occasionally start to be treated with a touch of irony. The omnipresence of the plot element damsel-in-distress-rescued-by-male-hero in the superhero genre is winked in the story “The King of Crackpot Lane” from *Superman* #24 (1943) when Lois, awaiting rescue after having been pushed from a cliff, confuses Superman with various other DC heroes: “Batman! I – I mean, Dr. Fate! No – I mean, the Flash! ...Never mind who I mean, just catch me!” When Superman on the next page offers the advice “May I suggest you contact the police!,” Lois replies, tongue firmly in cheek: “A first-rate suggestion. One that even a mere girl like myself might have thought of.” The story “Perils of Poor Lois” from the same *Superman* issue casts Lois and Superman as characters in “an old-time melodrama,” a nostalgic play that, reminiscent of 1890s popular theater, employs the very damsel-in-distress storyline so typical to the superhero genre. According to the narrator, this storyline would be rejected by a modern audience were it not for the character of Superman:

“The heartless villain twirls his waxed mustachios, chuckling cruelly as death creeps upon the starry-eyed heroine! The audience leans forward, breathless, taut-nerved, every bit as jittery as the helpless damsel! And then, when it seems that all hope is gone – miracle of miracles! –the handsome hero dashes to the rescue, and the house rocks with cheers and applause! –The old hokum, you say? The sort of stuff theater-goers liked in the gay nineties? –Not this time, friend – for our hero is none other than Superman, rocketing through a super-melodrama to smash a super-scoundrel in new and amazing ways!”

In yet another story from *Superman* #24, “Suicide Voyage,” Lois explicitly confronts sexism at her workplace. When both Clark and the newspaper’s editor-in-chief insist that reporting on a dangerous rescue expedition “doesn’t sound... like a job for a girl,” Lois protests and refuses to back down. The plot proves her feminist agenda to be misguided, to be sure, confirming that she just cannot get by without her male hero, but the fact remains that women’s rights had become a subject that popular products had to address in order to be perceived as relevant.

By and large, though, the comic books of the war years avoid explicit social commentary. As dream content, “the supernatural,” and other forms of fantasy increasingly dominate Superman’s environment, the critical depiction of American society is gradually replaced by its mythical idealization as harmonious and conflict-free. Picturing a fantasy world in which ambiguities are rare, the stories’ moral landscape increasingly loses its shades of grey and is reduced to choices in black and white. The plot no longer locates the threat within the society of which the reader is a member, but instead casts it as an intruding, stereotypically identified, evil Other.

The theme of a chosen people under attack is deeply rooted in North American heritage and culture, going back to the Indian captivity narratives of the seventeenth century, one of the earliest forms of American literature. In order to allow for the celebration of an innocent community, these popular novels exscribe the Other by projecting all evil outward. Their generic plot structure has it that heroic violence is required to confront the foes of the community. In the 1880s, Will Cody, a.k.a. Buffalo Bill, successfully exploited popular demand for such heroic violence when he developed highly influential Wild West outdoor shows presenting mythical heroes with guns protecting civilization against savage Indian attacks. These rituals soothed the Western consciousness by conveniently transfiguring the facts about the genocide of Native Americans into what Lawrence and Jewett refer to as the American monomyth. From 1941 on, the superhero comic books increasingly borrow from this formula, exscribing the Other and supporting a reading position that understands the superhero as a secularized version of the Christ figure, one that combines elements of the selfless servant with those of the zealous crusader. The foundation for such a religious reading position lies in Superman's origin story. Like Jesus, Superman is sent to Earth to be a hero among us. Both characters are raised by a humble couple aware of their son's uniqueness. Both have derived their superhuman powers from roots in "another world," and as they place these powers into the service of humankind represent the fulfillment of human hopes for a messiah.

In the Superman comics of the early 1940s, the reality-based conflicts of the pre-war years increasingly give way to personal adversaries of superhuman proportions,ⁱⁱⁱ super-villains referred to as "fiendish monster[s]" (SUP #16, "Case of the Runaway Skyscrapers," 1942), "criminal mastermind[s]" or "archvillain[s]" (SUP #17, "The Human Bomb," 1942).^{iv} The narrator of *Action Comics* #51 (1942) recapitulates: "Meeting villains is part of Superman's daily routine." The villains are still often characterized by physical disabilities and an

oversized brain (AC #56, 1943), and their exorbitant intelligence is always associated with a “cruelly calculating” mindset and “cold-blooded,” “utterly heartless” (SUP #17, “The Human Bomb,” 1942) behavior: “Abou Sabut’s clever – too clever for his own good!” (SUP #16, “Terror from the Stars,” 1942). In established villain-tradition, they always have to admit defeat at the end of the story, but never lose hope for better luck next time: “So Superman has the last laugh – this time! But we will clash again – soon!” (AC #52, 1942).

In addition, however, a new kind of villain starts to appear during the war. Pioneering the genre’s post-war trend towards elements of light comedy, the Toyman, the Puzzler, the Frankster, and Mr. Mxyzptlk are no evil masterminds, but rather infantile troublemakers representing childhood’s egotism and anarchy. To them, the universe is nothing but a giant playground. In tune with DC’s editorial decision to tone down the violent content of its titles, their conflicts with the hero are marked by infantile and absurdist humor. It becomes Superman’s task, for example, to send Mr. Mxyzptlk back to his dimension by tricking him into spelling his own name backwards.

Like most American producers of popular entertainment during the war, DC did not pass up the opportunity to promote its heroes as flag-waving patriots doing their part in the war effort. Superman is no longer introduced as “champion of the helpless and oppressed” (SUP #4, 2nd story, 1940), but as “foe of all interests and activities subversive to this country’s best interests” (SUP #10, 4th story, 1941). Cover images designed to appease conservative critics of the medium frequently depict the hero in direct combat with enemy soldiers, though these covers are usually unrelated to the actual story content. While the Superman of the war-time narratives rarely leaves his adopted home country behind to directly confront German and Japanese troops,^v he finds a field of activity stateside, bolstering American troops from afar by protecting the nation’s popular symbolic landmarks such as the Washington Monument and the Statue of Liberty (AC #57, 1943), and by fighting Fifth

Columnists (SUP #15, “Saboteurs from Napkan,” 1942; SUP #17, “Man or Superman?”, 1942; AC #62, 1943) and other “un-American activities” (SUP #10, 4th story, 1941).

Patriotic support for the United States was perpetually accompanied by racist attacks on the Other, both in popular culture and in reality. Racism was not only an inherent part of the enemies’ ideology, but also of everyday life in the United States. The Ku Klux Klan had been revived in the 1920s, and its influence was spreading to the Northern states. Most black people, along with other tenant farmers, farm laborers, domestic workers, and migrants, had been ignored by the New Deal programs of the 1930s and were still discriminated against in the job market and in almost every other aspect of society. Even in the armed forces, blacks and whites were segregated. Moreover, hatred against everybody and everything even remotely Japanese or German was widespread among Americans during the war, helping create an atmosphere that would allow for killing millions of civilians with large-scale air attacks on German and Japanese cities and for dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.

At a time when it was accepted practice to depict the enemy as physically and mentally inferior, in the pages of the Superman comics Japanese and German soldiers are consistently reduced to stereotyped, distorted caricatures of purely negative, even sub-human attributes. Oppositional reading positions are marginalized, uncertainties avoided. In *Superman #22*’s “Meet the Squiffles!” (1943), Hitler is portrayed as a man possessed by actual demons. The physical and moral inferiority of the enemy are conveyed by an unspoken racist discourse that positions the reader at the point from which the alleged “truth” is made to seem objective and natural. It comes as no surprise, then, that on the cover of *Action Comics #58*, Superman prints posters proclaiming “You Can Slap a Jap.” In “The King of Crackpot Lane” from *Superman #24* (1943), Lois Lane describes an all-too-realistic plan to cause “terrific destruction” in Germany as “kinda cute.”

The superhero genre was one of the biggest popular success stories of the war years. A possible explanation is that the “hard bodies” it celebrates, bodies clear in outline and firm in definition, could be viewed to represent the ideal man deemed necessary to defend the country’s existing society against both foreign enemies and “internal feminization.” In this sense, the wholly masculine heroic body of the so-called Man of Steel becomes an agent for national and patriarchal interests by drawing a defensive line between Us (the good and well-intentioned) and Them (the bad and evil-minded), by connoting Us with discipline and rational control while concealing the weakness of the inside.^{vi}

When the narrator refers to Superman as “patriot number one” (SUP #12, 3rd story, 1941), the reader is invited to identify with a patriotism that is implicitly masculine, and from which anything feminine has been exscribed. The Superman of the war years accordingly still feels free to enjoy the physical powers his hyper-masculinity provides: “Yippee!! Keep em flying!” (SUP #16, “Racket on Delivery,” 1942). His intuitive violent methods are promoted by the plot structures as a matter of course; the narrator describes the hero favorably as acting “in typical slam-bang fashion” (SUP #18, “The Conquest of a City,” 1942).

Nevertheless, violent excess is on display far less frequently than before the summer of 1941. Most significantly, Superman hardly ever^{vii} kills his opponents anymore. Occasionally he even saves their lives, though the fact that editorial instructions are responsible shines through in the hero’s lack of conviction that such clemency is reasonable: “Above all I must save human life... no matter how little those thugs deserve it...” (SUP #20, “Not in the Cards,” 1943).^{viii} The restraint Superman now exercises can by no means be equated with a rejection of the death penalty as a matter of principle; it only means that he bows to the law by no longer killing criminals himself: “Can’t let you die like this when a spot is already reserved for you in the electric chair!” (AC #43, 1941). Yet the fact that the superhero now

draws a line he will not cross marks an essential re-evaluation of the superhero concept. Claiming discipline, rationality, control, and lawfulness for Us and against Them is an essential element of war-time propaganda, intended to lend an aura of legitimacy to the war effort. In order to become “patriot number one,” Superman has to leave behind the days of violent rampage and subscribe to the job requirements dictated by the objectives of propaganda.

Moreover, the combination of physicality and restraint that now characterizes the hero correlates with the tension between freedom and restraint that is built into our Western ideological construction of masculinity. According to John Fiske, “the [masculine] privilege of authority is bought by the discipline of duty and service,” a paradox that creates tension between authority exerted and submitted to (1992a: 208). Not surprisingly, this tension becomes a trademark of the superhero at a time when war-time propaganda casts patriotism as deeply masculine. The super-villain, by contrast, lacks both the physical power and the restraint of the hero. He lacks, in other words, the primary markers of masculinity. A gender-specific dimension is thus added to the relationship between hero and villain: the opposition between physicality and intellect that had been central to the relationship ever since the introduction of the Ultra-Humanite is complemented by that between restraint and selfishness. The hero, representing the masculine ideal, uses his physical powers to serve the community, never merely as tools to achieve self-centered goals. The villain, in contrast, seeks to attain power and glory despite physical inferiority for his own selfish benefit. While the physical powers of the superhero are, in alignment with the above-outlined definition of masculinity and with the requirements of war-time propaganda, controlled by moral convictions, the super-villain improperly tries to overcome his “natural” physical inferiority by using his intellectual abilities ruthlessly and immorally. As the villain is placed outside the culturally constructed sphere of masculinity, he becomes the

symbolic enemy of the war effort. The conflict between hero and villain, then, can from 1941 on be read both as a patriarchal metaphor for power relations in society and as a nationalistic one for the conflict of war.

The question arises whether the selfless and self-disciplined devotion to the larger community that comes to chiefly characterize the superhero from 1941 on is at odds with the modern individual's desire for self-fulfillment. The Superman narrative suggests that there can be no real self-fulfillment without self-giving, a claim that fictitiously resolves the ideological conflict between self-restraint and self-fulfillment which is located at the very heart of the struggle between Puritan and modern values. Superman, in this sense, embodies the reconciliation of these values.^{ix}

The Justice Society of America

The first two issues of *All Star Comics* were regular anthologies like DC had published before, collecting under one cover separate short stories, each featuring one of the company's heroes. The issue that introduced a new concept destined to revolutionize the superhero genre was *All Star Comics* #3. While still offering one individual adventure per hero, it for the first time brought these heroes together to discuss matters in a framing sequence. From this moment on, the Flash, Green Lantern, the Spectre, the Hawkman, Dr. Fate, Hour Man, the Sandman, and the Atom no longer merely starred in their own independent stories, but were shown to share the same interrelated universe. They formed a first team of superheroes, the Justice Society of America (JSA).^x It was not long before two or three members would face the menace of the month side by side, instead of just talking their individual adventures over in the issue's first and final chapters. From the 1960s on, the notion of one fictional world inhabited by interrelated, previously unconnected characters

would develop into extensively constructed, company-spanning universes studied and followed in detail by fans.

When the JSA was introduced late in 1940, the American economy was showing signs of recovery and American involvement in World War II was becoming more likely. From the summer of 1941 on, *All Star Comics* was, like all DC titles, under control of the Editorial Advisory Board. It comes as no surprise, then, that the power bloc is generally portrayed favourably in the JSA stories. An industrialist expresses unselfish and caring thoughtfulness towards his employees: “I want our men to have the best living and working conditions America can give them” (#16, Hawkman section, 1943). Politicians do not, as in many of the pre-war titles, connote corruption, but honest ambition to support the working class: “As Governor, I’m going to do all I can to stamp out crime and help the ‘little fellow’ keep the money he earns by the sweat of his brow!” (#8, Starman section, 1941/42). The heroes and the forces of law and order work hand in hand, maintaining friendly relations. When a national institution is suspected of wrongdoing, the responsibility is conveniently shifted to a super-villain by the hero: “Of course the Research Society wouldn’t do anything wrong – but a criminally inclined super-brain would!” (#15, Spectre section, 1943). The Chief of the Federal Bureau of Investigation is warmly received by the team, and hero Hawkman expresses his deep admiration: “We’re expecting a visitor! A man who has done much for law and justice in the United States – the F.B.I. Chief from Washington!” Teammate the Atom is overwhelmed: “Golly! That’s what I call an honor!” Hour Man agrees: “It sure is! We’ve got to show him we appreciate it!” The Spectre rises to speak: “We want you to know we feel mighty good about this visit, sir!” Johnny adds: “Anything you want – just ask for it!” Eventually the team even makes the Chief an “associate member of the Justice Society” (#9, Justice Society section, 1942).^{xi}

The idealized depiction of a conflict-free status quo matched badly with reality, though, as American labor unrest continued when growing business profits did not translate into increased wages. In fact, there were more strikes during the war years than in any comparable period in American history, about fourteen thousand according to historian Howard Zinn (150). A million workers were on strike in 1944 alone. This inconsistency between fiction and reality called for an explanation, and Nazi agents out “to spread disunity” (#16, Spectre section, 1943) fit the bill. One agent admits:

“I came to spread the Gospel of Hate and Prejudice. I came to lie and cheat American workingmen... I wanted to stir up a strike here so you couldn’t produce the steel your war factories need” (Hawkman section).

Nazi agents are conveniently blamed for all inner American strife, allowing for a propagandistic display of otherwise idyllic working relations and for the general celebration of “the glorious country that is America” (#16, inside cover, 1943). According to the logic of these stories, only people who have unknowingly been victimized by Nazi agents could possibly find any reason to protest against the American status quo. Even before the establishment of DC’s Editorial Advisory Board, the Justice Society in *All Star Comics* #4 (March-April 1941) already takes orders from the F.B.I. and “‘goes to war’ against the subversive activities of the ‘Fifth Column’” (Justice Society Section).

While the authorities and institutionalized power appear in the best possible light, working-class characteristics such as slang are metonymically displaced on to criminal activity, ideologically promoting classism and thus confirming the status quo. A gangster can easily be identified by a hero: “He called me a lug! Hm – talks like a gangster!” (#7, Hour Man section, 1941). Elsewhere, a criminal’s slang is so thick it borders on parody: “Hey! –Dats a insult! Callin’ us gentlemen! Yah! I got a notion ta biff him one!” (#5, Justice Society section, 1941). Unrefined appearance is shown to be another reliable signifier of

criminality: “Officer, this man stole my gem! He’s suspicious-looking.” The suspicion is confirmed on the very next page (#8, Atom section, 1941/42). Criminality is no longer portrayed as the result of an unbalanced and repressive status quo but naturalized, that is, presented as the unavoidable expression of an inborn affiliation with low social status.

Occasionally, however, this simplistic point of view is undermined by comments that convey pre-war-style social awareness. Team member Dr. Mid-Nite, for example, in one instance longs for a time in which schools have replaced prisons, implying that crime might be a social disease after all, one that needs to be approached in a more holistic way than superheroic crime-fighting conventionally suggests (#10, 1942). From time to time the members of the JSA dedicate themselves to helping socially disadvantaged population groups such as the innocent victims of World War II, homeless orphans in particular (#7, 1941). Elsewhere, the team fights discrimination against the physically disabled (#27, 1945). In yet another story, the heroes attend to former criminal Joe on his deathbed, allowing him to die with a clear conscience by helping him correct the central missteps of his life. When Hawkman bids the ex-convict farewell, he even broadens the genre’s conventional concept of heroism:

“You are [a hero], Joe. Even though a man is weak, if he fights to overcome his weaknesses – and wins – he deserves the best! No one is perfect! But by realizing our mistakes, by fighting to overcome them, by battling the temptation to do wrong – we are tested in this crucible of life where the dross is swept away, and pure good remains!” (#21, 1944).

Significant in this context of social commitment, however, is the lack of concern with the rights of the largest minority group, women.^{xiii} Like in most comic books of the time, the portrayal of women in the pages of *All Star Comics* insists on patriarchal societal structures. Wonder Woman, an exceptionally powerful representative of femininity in her own series,

is reduced to the role of the team's secretary and excluded from active participation in the adventures: "Unfortunately, as secretary and honorary member I have to remain behind but I'll be with you in spirit!" (#14, Justice Society section, 1942/43). Only occasionally is she able to mention her feminist and pacifist ideals (#13, "Turtles and T.N.T.," 1942). When the heroes' girlfriends join forces and put on heroic costumes that resemble those of their boyfriends, they soon learn that taking the initiative and defeating dangerous villains is a male privilege: "We certainly got ourselves into a jam, didn't we?" (#15, Justice Society section, 1943).

All Star Comics during the war served as part of the mass media's propaganda monologue which, encouraged by government manuals sent out to producers of popular entertainment, was designed to increase support for the war effort. At least one of the stories was written in direct response to a request from the Office of War Information and the writers' War Board (Harvey 1999: 6). In 1942, the Justice Society becomes the Justice Battalion of America and goes to war. Covers carry headlines like #11's "The Justice Society Joins the War on Japan!" or #12's "The Justice Society of America Pursues Victory for America and Democracy!"

When it comes to portraying the enemy, there is no room for shades of grey. The narrator comments: "Good versus Evil – America versus Japan!" Like in the Superman titles and most other comic books of the time, the depiction of American soldiers on the one hand, and Japanese and German soldiers on the other, is deeply stereotypical. Enemy soldiers are presented as evil Others, that is, classified by both visual and verbal textual agencies as highly simplified signs that explicitly represent a set of purely negative judgments and assumptions regarding their characteristics and behavior. The stereotypes are grouped not only around the poles of "good" and "evil," but also of "superior" and "inferior." Natural physical signs and racial characteristics become the unalterable signifiers of inferiority (#12, 1942).^{xiii}

The ability of stereotyping to depict the enemy as a homogeneous compound of negative characteristics, rather than an accumulation of unique individuals, makes it an essential element of war-time propaganda. In *All Star Comics* #24's attempt to describe Germany as historically incapable of peaceful partnerships and thus in need of forceful indoctrination, a distorted overview of the country's history is given, reducing it to a succession of violent conflicts. The portrayal of the enemy in stories such as this is strictly based on and in turn creates prejudice, an essential element of war-time propaganda. The text creates an antithesis between "Us," the good guys, the incarnation of characteristics such as virtue, heroism, and innocence, and "Them," the enemy, the embodiment of Evil.

Americans of Japanese or German descent are dealt with separately. A representative of the former, referred to as a "Yankee Jap" by JSA member the Atom, reassures his fellow-citizens: "Well, you needn't worry – I'm Japanese all right, but I was born in America and I love this country as much as you do!" The Atom patronizingly approves: "Good boy!" (#12, 1942). An American of German descent announces accordingly: "We people of German descent in America hate Hitler and his doctrine of Nazism as much as anyone – we love our relatives, but we are first of all Americans!" The Atom declares: "Foreign born or not, white, black or brown, we're all the same, one for all, and all for one!" The Sandman puts it this way: "You're all different types, yet you're all Americans!" Exclamations such as "Ach! Himmel!" or "Blitz-Donnerwetter," on the other hand, are presented as dependable indicators of Nazism when Starman asks: "Did you hear 'em swearing in German??" The American crowd replies truthfully and without hesitation: "Starman's right! Those liars are Nazis!!" (#16, 1943). Yet as ambivalent, condescending, or half-hearted as some of these representations in defense of American citizens of Japanese or German descent may sound today, they come close to expressions of civil courage when considered in historical context. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, anti-Japanese hysteria swept the country. Prejudice

became institutionalized as racist policies. In February 1942, Executive Order 9066 gave the military the power to send every Japanese-American on the West Coast, most of them American citizens born in the United States, to camps, where they had to live under prison conditions until the end of the war. No warrants, indictments, or hearings were needed for the arrests.

While many war-time stories in *All Star Comics* are characterized by racist depictions of the enemy, prejudice between Americans of diverse origins is, just like all other inner-American strife, shown to be initiated by Nazi agents. A child turns to JSA member Dr. Mid-Nite:

“That’s right! Some of the fellows have been pickin’ on a couple of Jewish kids in the neighborhood... They been pickin’ on other kids too! Polish, Chinese, and Slovacs! They say we aren’t Americans! We are too, aren’t we, Dr. Mid-Nite?”

The hero reassures the kid: “You certainly are Americans!” Sure enough, a Nazi agent quickly admits to his abysmal agenda: “I’ve been spreading certain stories among the poor kids... Soon we will have all these un-American people put into concentration camps, by popular request!” Elsewhere, the Atom uncovers a similar plot: “That’s a lot of Nazi propaganda! You want to stir up trouble so we won’t get coal to run our blast furnaces!” He continues: “These hired rats will stop at nothing to turn Americans against each other!” (#16, 1943).

However, Nazis and their agents in 1943 start to be replaced by genre-typical, fantastic super-villains like the Brain-Wave, another extremely intelligent social outsider:

“The ‘Brain Wave’ sits alone... [His] brain is so powerful, so well trained that it can project its mental images along the slender beam of thought waves to take form as three-dimensional images” (#15, 1943).

The war gradually drifted into the background of the stories, as the American public longed for escapist entertainment rather than propagandistic war stories.

No matter whom the members of the Justice Society confront, their violent methods are never questioned by plot, narrator, or characters. Shortly before the installation of the Editorial Advisory Board, Hawkman himself sums up his attitude towards violence like this: “A fistfull of knuckles is always a good argument” (#4). When there is no brawl in sight, team member the Flash quickly gets bored: “Ho-hum! Crime isn’t what it used to be! Guess we’ve slowed things down to a walk!” Hawkman feels the same way: “I was looking for some crime to put an end to! No luck!” So does the Sandman: “I capture all the kidnappers working these days! Huh, can you imagine how slow life is going to be!” (#5). Even with the Board already in place, the team members do not view violence as merely a means to an end but rather enjoy it. Dr. Mid-Nite puts it this way: “It’s a lot of fun to slug a sneaking rat, all right!” (#12, Justice Society section, 1942). Starman cynically sings a tune while hitting a criminal named Alabama in the face: “Stars fell on ‘Alabama’ – da-da-de-dum!” (#8, 1941/42). The Atom ironically comments while beating up his opponent: “Waltz me around again, Willy!” (#9, 1942).

Even an opponent’s death is occasionally viewed as a viable option by the heroes. Team member the Spectre, for example, welcomes the death of German soldiers: “Good riddance to such vultures!” (#9, 1942). Hawkman comments on the apparent death of a villain: “It’s probably better this way! That fiend had too much power – and misused it!!” (#15, Justice Society section, 1943). Like the Superman of the war years, however, and in contrast to the pre-war heroes, the members of the JSA do not intentionally kill. The Atom ostentatiously makes an effort to save an opponent’s life, expressing his faith in the American justice system: “I can’t let him get killed! He’s got to repent for his deeds in jail!” (#7, 1941).

Plastic Man

Originally appearing as a secondary feature in the August 1941 premier issue of the anthology title *Police Comics* (PC), “Plastic Man” was promoted as the book’s lead story and main attraction by #3 and eventually got its own series also titled *Plastic Man* (PM). One of the stories’ earliest distinctive features is the hero’s criminal past. Plastic Man, a.k.a. Eel O’Brian, just like his partner Woozy Winks (PC #13, 1942), used to be a gangster:

“Well, y’see. My folks died when I was ten. Leaving me alone in the world. I tried to work hard but people kept pushing me around – always pushing!! Until finally I got tired of it and started pushing them around!!” (PC #1, 1941).

During the war years, when many publishers’ internal censorship ensured that clear lines were drawn between heroes and villains, the concept of a reformed criminal turned do-gooder was a surprisingly complex one, stretching the established definition of the superhero to its limits. While committing a robbery, O’Brian is accidentally doused by some unnamed acid. Rescued and nursed back to health by reclusive monks who inspire the criminal to reform, he discovers that the accident has provided him with the ability to stretch himself at will into any desired size and mold himself into any shape. It is an ability he shares with a versatile and easily shaped product of the chemical industry that was entering widespread use during the war as a metal substitute – plastic.

Roland Barthes has described the “scope of the transformations” that plastic renders possible as a source of “amazement” and “euphoria,” arguing that it “it gives man the measure of his power” (97-98). It is this “scope of the transformations” of plastic that also defines Plastic Man as a superhero, and the “amazement” and “euphoria” that these transformations were able to create in the 1940s certainly contributed to the hero’s popular

success. Like the material his name is based on, Plastic Man entered the popular market as a versatile and easily shaped alternative to a “harder” and more clearly defined product that was in high demand during the war – the conventional superhero. Equipped with a body that bends, stretches, bounces, and contorts into any ridiculous shape imaginable, Plastic Man naturally lacks the typical superheroic “hard body” that had come to represent the man best equipped to defend the country’s patriarchal status quo against foreign enemies as well as against internal feminization. By contrast, the elasticity of Plastic Man’s body blurs the dividing line between the male and the female, and in its zany over-the-top absurdity functions to parody and ridicule the notion of invulnerability. Conventional hyper-masculine superheroes in the tradition of Superman, it has been argued, use their tensely muscled bodies to draw a defensive line between the inner and the outer world, that is, to conceal the weakness of the inside. Plastic Man, on the other hand, does not shy away from cross-dressing or morphing into female form and kissing his confused male sidekick Woozy, indeed a bold move in 1944: “G-Gosh! He kissed me!” (PC #33).

The female characters Plastic Man encounters are far removed from the genre norm of the time as well. They are confident, active, assertive types who, in contrast to the conventional damsel in distress modelled after Lois Lane, do not depend on male heroes to rescue them when the going gets tough. Instead, they pursue their goals with a determination and resolve that frequently intimidates the male hero. These goals may not always be noble ones and the women who pursue them may be no angels, but they *are* powerful characters able to take care of themselves. While the vast majority of comic books were casting women as helpless victims in need of heroic male protection, “Plastic Man” featured a not-all-that-masculine and not-all-that-infallible hero alongside strong, independent women. Like no other comic-book title of the 1940s, “Plastic Man” served to undermine the popular patriarchal discourse that refused to acknowledge women’s changing role in society.

Like his predecessors, Plastic Man decides to use his superpowers for the benefit of mankind. His methods, however, differ greatly from those of most other superheroes and mark him as the gentlest comic-book crime-fighter of his day. Affirming the dignity and worth of all people even more consistently than Eisner's Spirit, Plastic Man displays a deep-seated belief in humanistic ideals at a time when complacent demonization of the Other was the default. When he does resort to physical violence, his actions are so far-fetched and over-the-top that they strongly suggest they are to be read as a parody of conventional superheroic violence. On one occasion, he throws up a criminal instead of a coin to flip on a difficult decision (PC #31, 1944); on another he spins a captive "like a huge top" in order to enforce a confession (PC #2, 1941). When Woozy intends to deal with a captured criminal in customary slam-bang fashion ("Got im, eh, Plas? ...Atta kid! ...Lemme use this hose on im! I'll make im talk!"), Plastic Man intervenes: "Nothing doing! ...I've got my own ideas on how to make him open up!" The plot ensures that the hero's gentler ways of interrogation, representing a generally more restrained and thoughtful application of superheroic force, meets with success as the criminal replies: "Listen... Plastic Man... I know you're gonna gimme a break... I know you're really a good guy... I'll tell ya the whole story..." (PC #25, 1943).

The hero's views of heroism and criminality remain informed by his own less than heroic past. In stark contrast to conventional heroes in the mode of Superman or the Batman, Plastic Man does not claim for himself the kind of untouchable moral authority that would set him apart from society:

"Would it surprise you if I said I had no moral right to act? Right now, I'm wanted in eight states for various crimes!! It's the same old story... boy orphan... bad company... petty crimes... later, big crimes... I was a public rat! Then came the accident that made me Plastic Man... I decided

to quit the game, change my face and fight for justice! But even now, when I relax my muscles, my face will resume... its original features... the face of gangster Eel O'Brien... public enemy number one!"

When Plastic Man is confronted with another reformed criminal still wanted by the unforgiving law, he refuses to arrest him: "The way I figure, your crimes are long forgotten... and you've suffered plenty already... so... shake!" (PC #19, 1943). "Good" and "evil" are moral categories that cannot be easily applied by the reader, a rare phenomenon in any popular medium during the war. Even the hero's own sidekick Woozy is not immune to the temptations of his old criminal lifestyle, having poorly hidden stolen stockings hanging out from his pants while hypocritically declaring: "Honesty always pays!" (PC #41, 1945). Plastic Man from time to time has to remind him: "That's right, Woozy... crime is a thing of the past!" (PC #38, 1945).

The established authorities – represented by a corrupt politician involved in drug smuggling (PC #2, 1941), a justice system in need of superheroic intervention (PM #1, "Willie McGoon, Dope," 1943; PC #27, 1944), or misguided police officers (PC #39, 1945) – are even less deserving of moral authority than the hero himself. The concept of prison as the solution to the ills of society, fundamental to the typical superhero story of the war years, is brought forward and made problematical when the F.B.I. Chief takes an overambitious Plastic Man aside:

"Yes, here's a petition begging the F.B.I. to lay you off, Plas! You've become a hazard to the police department... The jail is full – the cops have used all their gas coupons going after your prisoners – five cops dropped from overwork... I'm ordering you to take a two-weeks' vacation – starting now!" (PC #32, 1944).

Still, at a time when the popular media tended to idealize the status quo, even Plastic Man feels the need to make a few arrangements with the powers that be. First, in 1941, the hero is accepted as a special member of the police force: “Awright, you’re on the Force, ya big freak!!” (PC #2). Then, in 1943, he joins the ranks of the F.B.I.: “What else can I say when the President himself asks me to join the F.B.I.?” (PC #18).

Reference to World War II, however, remains very much the exception. The story “Now You See It, Now You Don’t” (PM #1, 1943) has Japanese agents kidnapping and attempting to torture Plastic Man, but the stereotypically distorted portrayal of the enemy is so over-the-top that it borders on parody. Even amongst themselves, for example, the Japanese communicate in poor English: “Much brilliant idea, Amisaki! ...It will pay back stupid Americans for bombing Tokyo!” The patriotic zeal of other superheroes is made fun of. In *Police Comics* #10 from 1942, the widespread fear of fifth columnist infiltration is shown to have undesirable consequences when Plastic Man suddenly suspects the audience: “Wait... there may be spies among the audience! Sorry, folks, but to reveal military secrets would be aiding the enemy!!!” In 1944’s *Police Comics* #33, Plastic Man believes he has identified some genre-typical “Fifth Column rats,” but the villain turns out to be an American trying to fulfill what he considers his patriotic duty. It is an extremely rare example of a popular product suggesting the possibility of misguided patriotism during World War II.

One of the characteristics of war-time superhero comics is their increasing reliance on the super-villain as the hero’s clearly defined “evil” counterpart and opponent, the Other, a development partly motivated by the attempt to sweep social issues under the rug for the sake of presenting national unity. The villains Plastic Man faces, however, do not always serve the purpose of repressing social issues. One of them, for example, has been created by a flawed justice system: “I was once run out of this city for a crime I didn’t commit!! So I

owe them a crime to make things even!! You'll soon see how complete the revenge of a scientific mind can be!!" (PM #1, "Willie McGoon," 1943). Another apparent "mad monster" from the same story turns out to be a sweet-tempered, misunderstood, tragically misguided, and mentally retarded social outcast: "Having the body of a man and the mind of a child, he is rejected by both – an outcast of society!! ...He just couldn't harm his fellow man!" The reader is invited to sympathize with this victim of a cruel and prejudiced society who is trying hard not to despair: "'Tain't their fault... it's muh ugly face!! I – I don't blame them fer hatin' me!! Mebbe tomorrow will be different! They can't hate me ferever... I hope!" The villains the hero is confronted with, it can be said, are not nearly as "evil" as those in other comic books, but rather mirror the hero's own imperfections. Many of Plastic Man's larger-than-life opponents are mentally unstable prisoners of their own compulsions. As such, they are deprived of the freedom to choose their villainous ways, a privilege that has been shown as essential to the concept of the conventional super-villain.

"Plastic Man" creator Jack Cole had previously worked as an assistant for Will Eisner, and many storytelling techniques Eisner had pioneered in "The Spirit," most notably the use of environment and of a symbolic splash page to set the mood, had a profound influence on Cole's work. Like Eisner's "The Spirit," Cole's "Plastic Man" was not a product of the customary assembly line production process. Equipped with an exceptionally wide range of talents, both Eisner and Cole at this stage of their careers insisted on creating as much of their stories as possible themselves, images as well as words. This dedicated and ambitious approach provided them with increased creative control, and allowed them to move away from established genre conventions and formulas and express a more personal artistic vision. By casting Plastic Man as both gentle hero and wanted criminal, as both successful and vulnerable, even as both male and female, Jack Cole turned the conventional hero

concept of the time upside down and provided an alternative to the one-dimensional propaganda monologue that dominated the popular landscape.

The drawing style that lends itself to the expression of such subversive ideas, it has been argued in Chapter 3.3, is the cartoony one. Cole's cartoony style, overloaded with zany stream-of-consciousness ideas, clearly communicates ironic distance from most conventions of the superhero genre as well as from the state of the comic-book industry as a whole. As the series continues, the plots appear increasingly improvised in their moment-to-moment flow and border on the absurd. Most characters come across as hyperactive forces of chaos. While the stories could still be read by children as straight-out adventure yarns, the overtones of parody and satire opened up the audience to an unusually high number of older readers, turning the series into a moderate popular success.

Wonder Woman

World War II was the first war in which uniformed American women took an active part; about four hundred thousand served their country overseas. At home, women worked in war industries in large numbers, most of them doing regular factory work, in order to replace the men who had gone off to war. At the same time, however, women's rights did not improve significantly as they were denied equal payment and policymaking positions. While the country depended on women adopting a more active role in society, the (almost exclusively male) power bloc insisted on the preservation of the patriarchal system its power was based on.

The comic books published during the war mirror this power struggle. In most cases, the portrayal of women tends to ideologically align itself with the patriarchal refusal to accredit women's crucial contributions to the war effort with an advancement of women's rights. Women, no matter how ambitious they may be, are usually shown to be in need of male

guidance and protection. While female sidekicks such as Bulletgirl, Doll Girl, or Hawkgirl are granted semi-heroic status, they are, much like the customary kid sidekicks, clearly subordinate to their male counterparts. Significantly, they were all referred to as “girls,” not as “women.” The first full-fledged comic-book superheroine to go beyond mere sidekick-status was Peggy Allen, a.k.a. the Woman in Red. Between 1940 and 1945, she appeared sporadically in the pages of *Thrilling Comics*, but was never given her own title. The first major comic-book superheroine was the Black Cat, introduced in *Pocket Comics* #1, then moving to *Speed Comics*. The Black Cat routinely exposed fifth columnists during the war, received her own title in 1946 when she became a crime-fighter, and lasted in various incarnations until 1963. During the war, she was joined by several patriotic superheroines such as Old Glory, Miss Victory, or Miss America, many of them drawn by women artists who had stepped in to fill the positions left vacant when male artists went off to the war. Hardly any of them had their own titles or survived the war, though. There were also superheroines like the Black Widow, Lady Satan, or Phantom Lady, who started appearing in slightly darker supernatural stories during the early 1940s, but their popular success was mild at best. Far and away the most popular superheroine of the medium’s formative years was Wonder Woman. Debuting in DC’s *All Star Comics* #8 in December 1941, she starred in *Sensation Comics* (SC) #1 only one month later, was promoted to her own monthly magazine called *Wonder Woman* (WW) in the summer of 1942, and even had her own newspaper strip by 1944. At its peak during World War II, *Wonder Woman* sold around two and a half million copies (Robbins 1996: 7).

The character’s creator, William Moulton Marston, was a successful psychologist and the inventor of the polygraph lie detector. In sharp contrast to the vast majority of comic-book creators, he was financially secure and thus did not depend on creating popular comics. Moreover, he was significantly older than most of his colleagues, well-educated, and a

member of DC's Editorial Advisory Board which consisted of psychologists and educators hired to lend an aura of respectability to the publisher's products. It comes as no surprise, then, that Marston's perspective on the superhero genre differed from that of other writers. Education and financial independence enabled him to take a critical look at the infant medium's most popular genre, and Marston was particularly concerned about its tendency to identify heroism with hyper-masculinity, that is, with the excription of the feminine:

“It seemed to me, from a psychological angle, that the comics' worst offense was their blood-curdling masculinity... It's smart to be strong. It's big to be generous, but it's sissified, according to exclusively male rules, to be tender, loving, affectionate, and alluring. ‘Aw, that's girl stuff!’ snorts our young comics reader, ‘Who wants to be a girl?’ And that's the point: not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength... Women's strong qualities have become despised” (quoted in Robbins 1996: 7).

At a time when working class girls' leisure time was to a large degree regulated by their parents and structured around the private sphere of the home, and when their access to popular culture was accordingly more constrained than that of boys, DC and Marston took a chance by conceiving of Wonder Woman as a means of attracting young female readers to the superhero genre who were repelled by its dominating patriarchal overtones. Marston understood that girls were not interested in identifying with a character like Lois Lane, whose chief narrative function was to provide the hero with an opportunity to prove his male superiority. Instead, the story “Wonder Woman Versus the Prison Spy Ring” (WW #1, 1942) depicts a spirited and lively young girl reading a Wonder Woman story in the pages of *Sensation Comics*. At a time when the country's fate relied on women gathering their own courage and strength, Wonder Woman sent the encouraging message to young female

readers that they were up to the task; that they could overcome the limitations of their traditional roles and come to the rescue of the women and men of the world.

In the tradition of classical mythic heroes, Wonder Woman, a.k.a. Princess Diana, is born from the union of a woman and a god. The woman is Amazon queen Hippolyta. The god, however, is really a goddess, namely Aphrodite, and Wonder Woman thus has two mothers, marking her as the personification of the feminine sphere. When a plane carrying American intelligence officer Steve Trevor crashes on Paradise Island, the Amazons' hidden refuge, Princess Diana saves his life, falls in love with him, and joins him on his flight back to warring Man's World. Disguised as an American army nurse in her everyday life, she frequently bursts onto the scene as Wonder Woman in order to introduce a much-needed female perspective to a patriarchal world on the verge of destruction. The narrator describes her mission like this: "Into this tortured, upside-down world of men, torn by hatreds, war and destruction, comes Wonder Woman, a powerful being of light and happiness" (SC #2, 1942), of "joy and laughter" (SC #26, 1944). Wonder Woman "brings to America woman's eternal gifts – love and wisdom" (SC #3, 1942), woman's inspiring "spell of love and beauty and peace" (SC #4, 1942). In their heroine, the Wonder Woman stories propagate a female ideal that combines traditionally "womanly" tendencies like pacifism, sensibility, and affection, with traditionally "manly" ones like power, strength, and confidence. Significantly, Trevor feels attracted to the self-assured, powerful heroine, not to her alter ego, the shy and demure Diana Prince who personifies a more traditional female ideal: "Listen Diana! You're a nice kid, and I like you. But if you think you can hold a candle to Wonder Woman you're crazy!" (SC #1, 1942).

In the Wonder Woman stories, Steve Trevor repeatedly gets into trouble over his head and needs to be rescued by Wonder Woman. It could be argued, then, that he takes over the narrative function of the likes of Lois Lane, while Wonder Woman adopts that of the

archetypal superhero modelled after Superman. In that case, the roles of male and female would simply have been reversed. It is important to note, however, that the hero concept Wonder Woman is based on differs fundamentally from the one that has been established by Superman. The conventional superhero of the time is a relatively aloof, inaccessible, and unapproachable character, elevated by the plot to the exclusive status of untouchable superiority. Potential kid sidekicks are never equal, but always subordinate partners who act according to the hero's instructions. Wonder Woman, on the other hand, represents a much more inclusive hero concept. She is comfortable in the company of friends, particularly her women friends from Holliday College. Far from being another unapproachable and superior redeemer, she frequently needs their help and treats them as equals. The narrator refers to the community she surrounds herself with as "Wonder Woman's army" (SC #2 and 3, 1942), locating heroism in an empowering shared womanhood and sending the humanistic message that heroism does not require super powers.

Another aspect setting the Wonder Woman stories apart is the heroine's critical attitude towards physical violence, which is even more pronounced than that of Plastic Man. At a time when internal censorship ensured that DC's heroes no longer kill people, Wonder Woman takes things a step further and even avoids killing animals (WW #1, "The Greatest Feat of Daring in Human History," 1942). Convinced that "bullets never solved a human problem yet" (WW #6, "The Adventure of the Beauty Club," 1943), she truthfully announces: "I never carry weapons – search me!" (SC #28, 1944). Instead, she wears bracelets that prevent her from resorting to excessive physical force, making explicit and highlighting the virtue of self-control that is ascribed implicitly and less consistently to DC's male heroes of the time. Without her bracelets, the heroine in *Sensation Comics* #19 (1943) momentarily feels "free to destroy like a man," but as soon as the bracelets are back in place she breathes a sigh of relief: "It's wonderful to feel my strength bound again – power

without self-control tears a girl to pieces!” Her conviction that power must be controlled also finds expression when Wonder Woman strictly and unconditionally follows the rules of democracy, refusing the privileges of a superhero: “Please don’t ask special privileges for me – I’ll submit to arrest like anybody else” (WW #2, “The Duke of Deception,” 1942). And: “I’m Wonder Woman and I believe in obeying the law even though it’s used against me by a crook!” (SC #15, 1943).

Casting discipline and restraint as feminine rather than masculine attributes, the Wonder Woman narrative challenged the Western concept of masculinity that the other DC titles had just started to embrace. By extension, it challenged the masculine “privilege of authority [that] is bought by the discipline of duty and service” (Fiske 1992a: 208), promoting female empowerment instead. While Wonder Woman, who has above been argued to personify femininity, insists that power needs to be controlled and violence avoided whenever possible, excessive violence is connoted by the text with masculinity. When fellow Amazon Mala in *Sensation Comics* #29 (1944) leaves the feminine sphere of Paradise Island to explore the patriarchal society of the United States, she finds herself in a movie theatre and is appalled by the film’s glorification of violence: “It’s horrible! And they call human slaughter pictures ‘good clean entertainment’ in this man’s world!” Mala might as well have taken a look at DC’s own comic books that, even after the Editorial Advisory Board has been established, show Wonder Woman’s male counterparts heroically revelling in their physical strength. The ideal of a hyper-masculine, all-powerful, and thus uncontrollable Superman-like hero is explicitly criticized in “The Rubber Barons” of *Wonder Woman* #4, a story in which a man’s wish to emulate this ideal leads him to commit a crime. Wonder Woman expresses amusement with the male desire to compensate for subjectively experienced personal powerlessness by projecting power fantasies onto an omnipotent alter-ego construct, a desire that has been argued to be central to the

conventional superhero title's popular appeal: "Honestly, ...isn't he priceless!" In order for the criminal to be reformed, of course, the ideal of Superman in his mind needs to be replaced by that of Wonder Woman.

Conventional superhero stories of the American war years, as we have seen above, cast patriotism as an implicitly masculine affair that requires the exscription of the feminine. The *Wonder Woman* narrative does not subscribe to this point of view. Rather than propagating the exscription of the feminine as the appropriate response to a war brought about by demonic Nazis, it holds the attempt to exscribe the feminine responsible for the existence of war. War, in other words, is defined as the product of a male-dominated society, as a phenomenon that would not exist in a society dominated by women. Mars, Roman god of war, declares: "Women are the natural spoils of war!" (WW #5, "Battle for Womanhood," 1943). The story "America's Wonder Women of Tomorrow" (WW #7, 1943) envisions a peaceful America governed by a woman in the year 3000 A.D.: "There hasn't been a murder... since women came into power!" In the year 3700 A.D., women and men are finally united in harmony, agreeing that: "Men and women will be equal. But woman's influence will control most governments because women are more ready to serve others unselfishly!"

Other stories take a less abstract look at the phenomena of violence and war and are more in tune with the period's typical popular propaganda monologue. They show Wonder Woman holding "a patriotic rally," advertising war stamps and bonds (WW #2, "Wonder Woman Campaigns for War Bonds and Stamps," 1942), or saving innocent American babies from a murderous Nazi conspiracy (SC #7, 1942). Still, Wonder Woman generally seeks to resolve conflicts peacefully. She does not believe in imprisonment but prefers to reform her enemies: "I'm sending her to Holliday College. It will do her good and put her on the right track" (SC #4, 1942). Her attempts at reforming are usually successful: "I can

change human character! I can make bad men good, and weak women strong!” (SC #6, 1942). One former enemy confirms: “Wonder Woman has changed my personality. I intend to stand trial for my sins!” (WW #3, “Ordeal of Fire,” 1943). In sharp contrast to conventional war-time popular fiction, Wonder Woman and the stories that feature her display a remarkable optimism about the possibility of reforming enemies, even Nazis: “Don’t kill them! I’ll take them back with me and see if Mala and her Amazons can make them into good citizens! ...While there’s life there’s good – in anybody!” (WW #8, “The Girl with the Iron Mask,” 1944). It should be noted, though, that Wonder Woman and her female friends occasionally do not shy away from corporal punishment in order to enforce the necessary discipline for the reform process.

During the war, it was DC policy to picture its heroes in harmony with the powers that be. In order to take the focus off inner strife, as we have seen, the typical DC story of the period 1941-1945 does not confront its hero with social injustice, but with larger-than-life super-villains. In the *Wonder Woman* stories of the time, however, super-villains play a minor role at best, with the first one appearing only in 1943.^{xiv} Social issues play a far more prominent role. In opposition to DC’s male heroes, the heroine perpetually confronts the patriarchal status quo and supports the repressed in their struggle for social justice: “I see you’re chaining me to the cookstove. What a perfect caveman idea!” (SC #9, 1942). She allies herself with women employees who protest against being exploited by their male employers: “We demand a living wage and healthy working conditions!” (SC #8, 1942). She repeatedly endorses children’s rights and an improvement of their social status: “Children are acute observers and adults ought to pay more attention to what their youngsters say!” (SC #17, 1943). Her soft heart cares for the poor and needy, for animals, and even for trees, as she understands their “language” and responds to their needs: “My poor beautiful balsam! You are battered... I’ll plant you” (SC #14, 1943). At the same time

she confronts and calls to account members of the power bloc who do not fulfill their obligations (SC #28, 1944). Wonder Woman, then, was DC's only social crusader during the American war years. She was able to do so probably because her creator William Moulton Marston was also a member of the publisher's Editorial Advisory Board.

Other Notable Superheroes

As the urban tone of the **Batman and Robin** narrative was difficult to reconcile with the war's global scale, explicit propagandistic messages are rare in both *Detective Comics* (DC) and the *Batman* (BAT) series. However, DC's editorial instructions called for the ideological alignment of its heroes with the status quo, a demand reflecting the widespread desire for national unity in times of war. At times the narrator still purports that the Batman is "always there... to help, advise, champion the weak" (BAT #12, "Around the Clock with the Batman," 1942), but the actual stories increasingly diminish social hardship, instead aligning the hero with the established institutions. Shortly after the establishment of the Editorial Advisory Board, police commissioner Gordon announces to the Dynamic Duo: "From now on, you work hand in hand with the police!" (BAT #7, "The People vs. the Batman," 1941). Occasionally, the Batman even enthusiastically follows directives from the federal government: "Let's go! Those are orders from Washington!" Robin feels honored: "Wow!" (BAT #8, "The Cross Country Crimes!," 1941/42). The moral "crime does not pay" is trumpeted over and over again to become the Batman narrative's official new leitmotif, a slogan promoting the notion that the stories are ultimately designed to persuade young readers to respect adult authority. Yet no matter how often this slogan is repeated, it conflicts with the inner logic of the superhero genre and provokes the question: Would a world in which crime does not pay really have any use for superheroes?

Like DC's other heroes, the Batman was no longer allowed to kill, but he certainly did not become a pacifist: "Dirty coward, I ought to break every bone in your body! ...But I'll settle for all your teeth!" (BAT #12, "Brothers in Crime!", 1942). Robin still needs the conflict with criminals to let off steam: "I'm so bored, I'd welcome a good, old-fashioned fist fight!" His adult partner feels the same way: "Me, too!" (DC #87, 1944). As soon as the opportunity to fight presents itself, the Boy Wonder feels relief: "Gosh, it's about time action popped! I was beginning to think crime had taken another holiday!" (BAT #10, "The Princess of Plunder!", 1942). Elsewhere he welcomes the sight of gangsters with the exclamation: "Yippee, lemme at em!" (BAT #9, "Christmas," 1942). The heroes' soft spot for brawls is never portrayed as problematic, as the criminals on the receiving end can easily be identified as worthy of physical punishment by external indicators or a "Sing Sing accent" (DC #87, 1944).

It took a few months for most creators at DC to internalize the new editorial instructions. Late in 1941, an "editor's note" claims that "the Batman never carries or kills with a gun," but the first part of this statement is refuted by the artwork on the same page (BAT #4, "Victory for the Dynamic Duo!"); the second part had only been true for a few months. Even in 1942 the occasional story still recalls the rebellious spirit of the Depression era, depicting citizens who "have been let to believe in the forces of law and order. And now it is these very forces which threaten to uproot the city... criminals who hide behind the uniforms of the law" (DC #60). Nevertheless, the new standards clearly dominate the Batman narrative from 1942 on. The hero now frequently refers to criminals as "rats," implicitly denying them human status and thus any hope of rehabilitation. The ability to reform criminals, one of the pre-war Batman's trademarks, is no longer demanded by the plots.^{xv} The only person who can be "rehabilitated" is not a criminal but schoolboy Tommy: "Little Tommy didn't like to go to school. He played hooky. He didn't study. He got bad

report cards. Tommy was a ba-ad boy!” After the heroes have attended to him, Tommy declares: “And I’m going to study hard from now on – no more hooky for me!” (BAT #10, “Report Card Blues!,” 1942). In this attempt at winning over adult critics, the story suggests not only the positive impact of the Batman’s behavior on a fictional character, but implicitly also that of a superhero comic book on the young reader’s mind.

Like most representatives of the genre during the American war years, the Batman titles generally display a shift from social consciousness to personal rivalries. Super-villains keep the heroes busy and thus serve to sweep social issues under the rug. The Penguin and Two-Face, introduced in *Detective Comics* #58 and #66, continue the tradition of physically handicapped rogues who depend on a “fertile – but twisted – brain” (DC #59, 1942) and are every bit as devoted to criminal activity as the Batman is to fighting it. Similar to the developments in the Superman titles, however, the Dynamic Duo increasingly develops a relationship of playful competition with its adversaries. In *Detective Comics* #51 (1941), the rivals meet in an amusement park, a locale that symbolizes the nature of their relationship. At the story’s end Robin reflects: “Gee, I sure had a lot of fun in that amusement park!” The Batman agrees: “I did, too – it did offer about the most amazing amusements!” When on one occasion the Batman lets an opponent’s pranks get to him, Robin is there to remind him: “You’re taking this too seriously! C’mon, don’t let it get the best of you!” (DC #71, 1943). DC’s editorial decision to tone down the violent content of its titles even forces the Joker to leave behind his homicidal roots, turning him into a relatively harmless “Crime Clown” (BAT #11, “The Joker’s Advertising Campaign,” 1942) and “Practical Joker” (DC #91, 1944). Significantly, the “battle of wits” that develops between the heroes and their arch-villain is judged by the local gazette to have enough comic potential to be adopted into a regular humorous feature called a “lamprooning cartoon” (DC #71, 1943).

The adventures featuring another popular superhero published by DC, the **Green Lantern**, also display the textual struggle for meanings brought about by restrictive editorial instructions. Like the Batman and Robin, the Green Lantern of both *All-American Comics* (AAC) and his own *Green Lantern* (GL) series still has not completely renounced his pre-war identity as violent social crusader by 1942, giving a whole new meaning to the notion of reformation: “I don’t like your faces, and when I don’t like people’s faces... I change them!” The hero exposes, for example, a mayor’s corrupt ties to a large corporation: “Could it be possible our esteemed Mayor is getting a large slice of money for giving that contract to Livingston?” The proprietor is forced to admit: “The mayor gave me contracts! In return I gave him a cut! I used cheap materials so I could save more money! We had Darcy killed because he was going to talk!” (AAC #34, 1942). Another element of the power bloc, the justice system, also proves to be as unreliable as during the pre-war years. When an innocent man is accused of a crime he did not commit, he depends on the superhero’s assistance to escape a false conviction. Yet, defying all logic, the wrongfully accused man draws a conclusion designed to whitewash the justice system:

“Judge... once long ago, I say to you there is-a no justice in court for-a little-a man. I know better now. I’m-a make-a big mistake! In this country there is justice for everybody. Sometimes there is a little-a misunderstanding first... but sooner or later justice she comes... it’s always come in this great country... the United States of America!” (GL #2, “Chapter 4,” 1942).

This status-quo-approving statement has clearly been forced upon a story that otherwise recalls the rebellious spirit of the pre-war years, conveniently sweeping under the carpet the fact that the court has been unable to deliver a just verdict and depends on superheroic intervention.

At times of war, as has been unfolded above, popular culture customarily serves as the tool of a propaganda machine designed to recruit support for the war effort. One of the propaganda monologue's central elements is the racist and distorted portrayal of the enemy as a caricature of purely negative attributes, as the evil Other. In arguably one of the most surprising moments of war-time popular culture outside a Wonder Woman comic book, a "wise man" undermines this central element of the propaganda monologue in a Green Lantern story: "[The Nazis] were good men, originally, and they'll be good men again! ...They will learn, as others before them have!" (GL #3, "Utopia vs. Totalitarianism," 1942). Instead of being reduced to a subhuman standard that shuts out any hopes for reformation and thus justifies anonymous killing, the enemy is portrayed as misguided but amenable to instruction. Shades of grey are introduced to a moral scale that the propaganda machine attempts to present as clearly divided into white and black, good and evil, Us and Them. Such complexity is very much the exception in any popular medium during war.

In contrast to the situation at DC, Quality Comics and **Spirit** publisher "Busy" Arnold granted his employees an unusual amount of creative freedom during World War II. He enforced a more status-quo-friendly redefinition of the heroes superficially and inconsistently at best, as can be witnessed most explicitly in the Plastic Man stories discussed above. Will Eisner was called to active duty in May 1942 and served in the army during World War II, but artists who filled in for him, Jack Cole and Lou Fine for example, ideologically (and, to the best of their considerable abilities, aesthetically) stuck with Eisner's concept. In 1943, the *Spirit* still exposes the corrupt mismanagement of a prison, stands up for prisoners' rights (24 Jan), and finds himself in conflict with the police (24 Oct). The patriarchal overtones that dominate most representatives of the genre are parodied when a kidnapped woman does not take on the role of the generic damsel in distress but instead turns the table on her kidnapper, terrifying him in the process (16 Aug

1942). Another strong woman distances herself from the comic-book cliché by mocking it: “After all, I’m nothing but a poor, weak, emotional woman underneath!” (13 Sep 1942).

In both style and content, “The Spirit” from the start displayed a critical awareness of many of the superhero genre’s preconceptions, targeting an older audience by creating room for genre-untypical reading positions. Nevertheless, the hero of the series is, by the publisher’s demand, a monomythic vigilante figure in the tradition of Superman, rising above the democratic system and its laws. Still in early 1941, the vigilante concept that is at the heart of the superhero genre comes to the critical attention of the story “Dead Duck Dolan” (2 Mar) in which citizens are outraged by the hero’s antidemocratic status: “Men beaten and that masked outlaw the Spirit running loose in our city!” Commissioner Dolan can’t help but understand their point of view: “You see, we don’t allow private citizens to take the law into their own hands.” Even the Spirit himself agrees: “You’re right, Dolan!! Citizens should not take the law into their own hands.” Yet that is exactly what he does, as the story “Andy Horgan” from 28 March 1943 explicitly confirms: “Above restricting conventions... rules the Spirit as he smashes crime beyond the reach of the law!” Or in the words of the Spirit himself: “Being an outlaw, I don’t have to concern myself with technicalities!” (9 Sep 1945). “The Spirit” is a superhero series far removed from many genre conventions, but one concept it ultimately cannot leave behind without turning its hero into a regular police officer and thus losing its affiliation with the genre is the definition of the superhero as vigilante. Popular culture in general bears traces of the constant struggle between domination and subordination, between power and resistance, but the textual struggle for meanings, rooted in the conflict of interests between dominating publisher and resisting creator, is rarely as apparent as it is in the ambiguous relationship of this series to the very concept of the superhero.

As a newspaper insert, “The Spirit” was largely targeted at an adult audience, yet it was conceived by the publisher as a superhero title and thus obligated to comply with the basic genre conventions. In order to put the genre’s largely preadolescent power fantasies into a more mature perspective, the series increasingly employed reflexive devices initiating the reader into the codes by which these fantasies were created – a highly unusual narrative strategy at a time when the typical young comic-book reader was not willing to compromise the pleasures of identification. When Eisner was still writing and drawing “The Spirit” in 1941, he introduced as his own alter ego an extremely fearful and jumpy cartoonist named Pink Perkins, creator of “The Spirit.” Highlighting the contrast between the hero as personified wish fulfillment on the one hand and the all-too-human creator on the other hand, terrified Pink Perkins asks the reader: “Who do they think I am anyhow... the Spirit?!!” (27 Jul). By early 1942, the fictional creator of “The Spirit” carries the real creator’s name, Will Eisner. Like Pink Perkins, he always appears to be behind schedule and haunted by deadlines. Notes from his editor are scattered on the floor by his drawing board, nagging “Where is the Spirit?” or “Deadline Spirit story due...” or “Eisner, you are late!!” Located on the same fictional level of narration as his hero, the fictional version of Eisner does not invent his stories, but waits for the Spirit to show up in person: “Yaawwwnnn... good grief!! It’s almost midnight, and the Spirit’s still not here with his weekly adventure!! ...Doesn’t he know I’m behind schedule as usual?” (3 May 1942). The milieu of comic-book production continues to be explored in the absence of Eisner. While Eisner continues to be officially credited as the creator of the series, a ghost (25 Oct 1942) and later a robot (21 Feb 1943) are shown interfering with the creative process, exposing the fact that anonymous ghostwriters have taken over. The cartoonist himself announces: “I won’t be responsible for anything that happens from here on” (25 Oct 1942).

Dominated by a genre that was largely targeted at preadolescent readers, comic books were lowly regarded by most adults and despised by the cultural elite, a situation ironically reflected upon when *Ebony* in “The Curse of the Kukri” (13 May 1945) turns to the reader to advertise the comic book as if it were an illegal product of the black market: “Psst! – Wanna have a li’l adventure and see some fast action? Jest folla me...” For an ambitious cartoonist like Eisner, intent on developing the literary potential of the comic-book medium by expanding it beyond the existing parameters, this was a challenging and often frustrating state of affairs. The story “The Oldest Man in the World” from 19 October 1941 features a framing sequence set one thousand years in the future, in which an issue of “The Spirit” from 1941 is discovered and read by archeologists completely unfamiliar with the medium: “They have nothing like this in our museums!” Even in the distant future, it is implied, comic books will not be embraced by “official culture,” that is, they will still receive no social legitimization or institutional support. Eisner’s efforts were thus in vain, and the archeologists accordingly have no interest in him: “Hmm, can’t make out the author’s name! Doesn’t matter...” They dismiss the comic book’s content as fantastic and therefore irrelevant, a position Eisner decries and, tongue firmly in cheek, disproves by letting the dismissed plot violently catch up with the unsuspecting archeologists.^{xvi}

In the story “Self Portrait” (3 May 1942), one of the last created by Eisner before he was inducted into the United States Army, the cartoonist again laments the public’s lack of respect for the medium. Out of the blue, a gangster decides: “I’m gonna be a cartoonist! ...I want a nice soft racket... like bein paid fer sittin‘ around and drawin‘ pitchers all day!! Dat’s d’life!!” A fictional version of Eisner doubts his qualifications: “But you aren’t a capable artist!! You can’t draw! You can’t write!!” The gangster contumeliously replies: “Neither can you! ...But you get away wid it!!” Tragically, the gangster’s disrespect for the medium turns out to be perfectly justified as his amateurish creations become a popular success, a

state of affairs mirroring Eisner's personal contempt for the aesthetically crude yet commercially successful early superhero comic books, as well as his regrets about a comic-book market determined by preadolescent consumers.

The **Captain Marvel** stories did not need much adjustment to the changing times, for they had already from their beginnings in early 1940 incorporated the growing popular desire for a unified country free from internal conflict. Fantastic narrative elements continue to dominate as the stories revolve around magic and science fiction, exscribing realistic social issues. The status quo is naturalized, that is, presented to have no alternative; its power structure appears to be based on objectively justified criteria. An obvious and unchangeable line divides the "good guys" from the "bad." In the story "Captain Marvel out West" (*Captain Marvel Adventures* #1, 1941), a woman considers a suspect to be innocent based on rather superficial impressions: "I don't think that stranger was guilty, Billy, he was too brave and handsome." Billy Batson, a.k.a. Captain Marvel, tends to agree: "You have a kind heart, Miss Daisy. Probably you're right about the stranger." The plot proves them right, as it ensures that external features clearly and reliably signify a person's character. A world so easy to understand and a status quo so flawless appear to have no use for a superhero, and Captain Marvel accordingly rejects self-administered justice: "That's no way to fight crime, gentlemen. Give him a trial and let the law punish him." Fantastic larger-than-life threats, then, become the only motivation for the hero to go into action.

The Sub-Mariner, in contrast, was radically redefined in 1941, as the noble but tragically misguided sworn enemy of all humankind incomprehensibly turns into an unreservedly all-American patriot. When it comes to fighting the Nazis, he does not even mind teaming up with his former opponent, the Human Torch. In *Marvel Mystery Comics* (MMC) #17 (1941), he asks him: "Are you ready to fight for Uncle Sam under any conditions?" When his new ally replies "you know I am," the Sub-Mariner is thrilled: "Swell." Together they

enjoy their violent and patriotic “little workouts” much in the way DC’s pre-war heroes used to enjoy their social crusades: “We had a lot of fun doing it!” Like in most comics of the period, enemy soldiers are stereotypically depicted as a homogeneous compound of purely negative characteristics. Natural physical signs and linguistic peculiarities are lampooned and turned into inborn signifiers of inferiority. The plot has it that a Nazi is sufficiently defined by his distorted exclamations: “Idiots! Dumbkopfs! Morons! Stupid heads! You let him get away – ach!” (MMC #42, 1943). The Sub-Mariner himself does not shy away from addressing Japanese soldiers as “you yellow scum” (MMC #17, 1941). It could be argued that the character of the Sub-Mariner stays true to his pre-war identity in so far as his preconceptions of enemy soldiers during the war are just as negatively distorted as his preconceptions of humankind as a whole before the war, but there is an essential difference: while his pre-war judgments were not supported by textual agencies, his war-time judgments are. The Sub-Mariner is thus transformed from a morally ambiguous anti-hero into a one-dimensional patriotic do-gooder.

A greater proportion of the American population than ever before or after was involved in the war effort during World War II. Eighteen million Americans served in the armed forces, more than half of them overseas; twenty-five million workers gave of their pay envelope regularly for war bonds. The U.S. Office of War Information considered making every citizen feel involved in the military effort its prime task, co-opting virtually every form of popular culture into its propaganda monologue. The vast majority of comic books participated in this monologue, some more reluctantly than others as has been outlined above. Two popular comic-book heroes of the time were primarily defined by militant patriotism. The first of them, MLJ’s the Shield, has been discussed in Chapter 3.4. By early 1941, Marvel reacted to the growing threat of a world war and to the closely related commercial success of the character the Shield not only by redefining the Sub-Mariner, but

also by debuting its own patriotic superhero, **Captain America**, in the pages of *Captain America Comics* #1. When Steve Rogers, outraged by the developments in Europe and Asia, attempts to enlist in the army, he is rejected “because of his unfit condition.” He volunteers for a dangerous experiment and is injected with a serum which drastically increases his stature and intelligence, turning him into a prototype super-soldier physically and intellectually superior to most humans, but without full-blown superpowers in the vein of Superman. The government official in charge of the experiment addresses the changed man like this: “We shall call you Captain America, son! Because, like you – America shall gain the strength and the will to safeguard our shores!” Just like the Shield, Steve puts on a costume that resembles the American flag and accepts orders from the government.

Even though the attack on Pearl Harbor was still months away, *Captain America Comics* from the start presented imaginary tales of glorified violence against Hitler and his stereotypically distorted cohorts. Captain America was the first superhero to confront a character clearly based on real-life Adolf Hitler instead of fictional tyrants that only more or less openly hint at him. The publication thus took a clear political stand which up to that point had been avoided by the comic-book industry,^{xvii} and the casting of Hitler himself turned out to be a commercial coup. Yet the series’ revolutionary approach towards the comic-book medium’s grammar would become its most influential feature.

In early films, the camera was assumed to be a passive spectator in a theater audience. It remained in a fixed position, just like the spectator remains in one seat in the theater. Around the turn of the century, British pioneers began exploring the elasticity of space in film by redefining the role of the camera. They became aware of the fact that only the screen itself is fixed; the possibilities of portraying the action on it are unlimited. Close-ups, traveling shots, pan shots, and cross-cuts were introduced. A scene no longer had to consist of one single shot but could join together various shots in any number of combinations.

Editing was discovered as a storytelling device capable of creating rhythm. Comic books passed through a similar development. As they communicate a story through a sequence of “frozen” and framed moments called panels which break up the flow of the narrative, the arrangement of the image within the frame on the one hand, and the sequential transitions from panel to panel on the other, make up the visual grammar of comic books. With the exception of Eisner’s “The Spirit,” this grammar during the early 1940s still mirrored the restrictive format requirements of the comic book’s immediate precursor, the comic strip. The comic books of the time were formally marked by the most basic and orderly page layouts, consisting originally of eight uniformly shaped panels displayed in four rows, later changed to six panels organized in three rows. The strict symmetry of the layout was maintained even when two or four panels were occasionally pulled together in order to create the opportunity for a single larger depiction. Panel borders were rigidly adhered to and infringed upon only slightly by a word balloon here and there. Panel transitions were disjointed and lacked dynamic force. The angles of the depictions within the frame kept the reader at bay, situating him or her as an uninvolved bystander.

Then Jack Kirby came along, building upon Eisner’s discovery that only the comic-book page itself is determined by the medium, while the action on it can be presented in any way imaginable. Kirby realized that the panel arrangement conveys timing and thus determines the rhythm of the story, that is, manipulates narrated time in order to create the desired effect upon the reader. The frame’s shape increasingly becomes a narrative device in *Captain America Comics*, conveying the emotional impact of the action. Page layouts become more elastic and dynamic. Depending on the desired effect, the story employs an increased number of panels to compress the narrated time, or a double-spread to create a narrative climax. The reader’s involvement with the story is heightened as the unleashed action “explodes” towards him or her. Characters bursting out of the confines of the panel

create the threatening illusion of unrestrained power. The reader is no longer situated at a “safe” distance but “thrown” right into the action as he or she experiences it from ever-changing angles.

The artwork of *Captain America Comics* creates a sense of awe by presenting the male body as all-powerful and uncontrollable, by celebrating, eroticizing, and idealizing it. The male body’s dominance by violent force is shown to be irresistible; the climax of the physical performance is extended and exhibited like never before in the genre. This kind of public display of power, raised to a new level by Kirby, is a typical element of masculine narratives, for masculine success requires public acclaim and visibility.

It must again be noted, though, that the genre-typical physicality which is further enhanced by Kirby’s drawing style can not only be read as a patriarchal discourse, but alternately also as a carnivalesque and thus subversive one, as the terrain of physical sensation that refuses the social identity proposed by the dominant ideology. Much like the world of wrestling as described by Barthes and like carnival as defined by Bakhtin, Kirby’s artwork is primarily concerned with the signifier rather than the signified, with surface rather than depth, with physicality rather than meaning, with fun rather than responsibility. The definition of the characters’ roles in *Captain America Comics* is obvious; psychological insight is uncalled-for. The conflicts between the characters represent a mythological fight between Good and Evil, each sign is endowed with an absolute clarity and can thus be understood on the spot. During the fight scenes, the reader is overwhelmed by the obviousness of the roles, momentarily raised above the ambiguities and contradictions of everyday life. The conclusive victory of Captain America is never in doubt. Like in the world of wrestling as described by Barthes,

“defeat is not a conventional sign, abandoned as soon as it is understood; it is not an outcome, but quite the contrary, it is a duration, a display, it

takes up the ancient myths of public Suffering and Humiliation: the cross and the pillory. It is as if the wrestler [or Captain America's opponent] is crucified in broad daylight and in the sight of all" (21).

Unlike the contestants of a polite sports competition who remain in control of their passions and confront each other with zeal, the physicality of Captain America, along with his mythical ability to grasp Evil and unveil a fantastic form of intelligible justice, functions as an outlet for the rage of the subordinate. The pleasures of the signifier's superficial physicality evade the sphere of the signified and are thus characterized by their ability to resist the social control of the status quo. Social control, after all, is built upon ideology, and ideology works through the signifieds.

ⁱ For this chapter, the following comic-book reprint anthologies were used: Beck, C. C. et al. 1999; Brevoort, T. 1997; Cole, J. 1998, 2000, 2001, 2003a; Eisner, W. 2001b-e, 2002a-c, 2003a-b; Finger, B. et al. 1999, 2002; Fox, G. et al. 2000, 2001a, 2002, 2005; Kane, B. 1991; Kane, B. et al. 1994, 1995, 1998, 2000; Marston, W. M. and Peter, H. G. 1998, 2000, 2002, 2003; Saffel, S. (ed.) 2009; Sedlmeier, C. (ed.) 2009; Siegel, J. and Shuster, J. 1991; Siegel, J. et al. 1994, 2001, 2003, 2005.

ⁱⁱ Cultural studies argues that popular culture arises from the capitalist system's mode of production, from its social division of labor between the capitalist owners of the means of production (the dominant, the backers) and the workers who only have their labor-power to sell (the subordinates, the performers). It claims that popular culture is created by subordinates who naturally resent their subordination, and are thus inclined to deliver a text that encourages subversive reading positions. At the same time, however, creators of popular culture must compromise with the dominant they depend on to provide the resources necessary for production. The dominant has an ideological interest in a text that encourages the reader to make sense of it in a way that serves the dominant's interests. Still, producers of popular culture are just as conflicted as its creators, for their economic interests call for products that attract a popular audience. In order to be popular, a text needs to be "open" to a variety of different reading positions; it needs to employ devices that enable a variety of readers to attach personal meaning to it; it needs to have points of relevance and provide pleasure to a variety of readers in a variety of social contexts.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Action Comics* #47 (1942) for the first time features a super-villain, Lex Luthor, on the cover, acknowledging the character's growing popularity and referring to him as a "super-enemy."

^{iv} The superhero comic books adopted this particular brand of fantasy from the pulp magazines of the Depression years. While the pre-war pulps were marked by the most extravagant heroes and villains, these characters either lost much of their superhuman powers or disappeared during the war, elbowed out by relatively mundane figures like cops, private detectives, and cowboys. The pulps thus developed in the opposite direction of the comic books, surrendering the realm of outright fantasy to their chief competitor.

^v For two rare examples of Superman confronting enemy soldiers abroad, see: SUP #15, “Superman in Oxnalta,” 1942; SUP #24, “Suicide Voyage,” 1943.

^{vi} Antony Easthope argues that

“nationalism fits perfectly with the masculine ego and the masculine body, so that each overlaps and confirms the other. Obviously, ‘they’ are bad and ‘we’ are good; they are ‘evil-minded’ and we are well-intentioned; they are ‘madmen,’ characterized by ‘mental instability’ while we are rational and ‘look to our defences’... Reason, perfect vision and the rule of law (‘legitimately’) all go together. But it is not just that ‘we’ and ‘they’ are contrasted – it is rather that a really firm line is drawn between the two, a defended barrier, like the battlements around the self of the hard edges of the male body. ‘We’ are familiar, ‘they’ are foreign; ‘we’ are *inside*, ‘they’ are *outside*. In this version of nationalism, friend and foe, at home and abroad, are superimposed on an idea of the masculine ego and its other, everything outside that threatens it” (1992: 56).

^{vii} On one occasion, Superman implicitly kills his murderous opponents when he turns to them with the words: “But now to give those cowardly devils a taste of their own destruction!” (SUP #21, “X-Alloy,” 1942).

^{viii} For more examples of Superman saving a criminal’s life, see: SUP #9, 1st story, 1941 (“I want you alive – able to stand trial and confess to your crimes!”); SUP #21, “X-Alloy,” 1943 (“Not that you deserve this!”).

^{ix} Yet the self-fulfillment Superman represents does not necessarily have to be read as a modern discourse, but can also be linked to the search for “perfection” that marks the traditional Protestant promise of an individual experience of conversion. The Perfectionist tradition does not look to institutions to remake man, but trusts that God will somehow bring about the creation of the “new man” that makes possible the reform of the world. In this context, Superman can be understood either as a godlike redeemer sent to Earth, or as the first “new man” destined to bring about the reform of the world.

^x Having previously been featured in separate stories, the Human Torch and the Sub-Mariner encountered each other six months prior to *All Star Comics* #3 in the pages of *Marvel Mystery Comics* #8 and #9. Rather than teaming up, however, they fought each other in what was advertised as “the battle of the century.” *Marvel Mystery Comics* #8 told the story of their first clash in two parts, one from the Human Torch’s and the other from the Sub-Mariner’s perspective. The following issue combined both features into one extended story.

^{xi} In one exceptional case, however, a team member detects a flaw in the system when clearing up a judicial error in order to save a wrongfully accused girl from the electric chair (ASC #19, Atom section, 1943). A rare

example of conflict between a team member and the police can be found in the Hour Man section of *All Star Comics* #6 (1941).

^{xii} I use the term “minority” not in its statistical sense, referring to groups that are smaller in number than the majority, but as a power discourse, referring to groups that are associated with a lack of power. Many writers consider women to be “doubly disadvantaged” in capitalist societies by the interrelations between the capital and patriarchal systems.

^{xiii} Such stereotypical depictions of the Japanese were by no means limited to lowbrow media like comic book and film; they were also common in the more highbrow news media. A war-time article in *Time* magazine, for example, read: “The ordinary unreasoning Jap is ignorant. Perhaps he is human. Nothing... indicates it” (quoted in Zinn: 154). *Life* magazine in 1944 published the photograph of the casually smiling girlfriend of an American soldier writing her boyfriend a thank-you note for sending her the skull of a Japanese soldier; the skull is placed in the picture’s foreground close to the note. The mutilation of dead Japanese soldiers was widespread practice among U. S. military personnel, and in many cases it included the taking of body parts – most commonly skulls and teeth – as “war trophies” (Trombetta: 115-16).

^{xiv} In keeping with established conventions, male villains such as Dr. Psycho or the Duke of Deception are grotesque creatures beyond redemption. Female villains are a completely different story, though. Receptive to the heroine’s message of love and humanitarianism, they can be reformed and eventually reintegrated into society, thus challenging the very definition of the super-villain.

^{xv} When the hero on one occasion appears to have reformed Two-Face (DC #80, 1943), the treatment’s success soon proves to be short-lived.

^{xvi} A similar framing sequence from 6 November 1949 features a homeless man finding an issue of “The Spirit” in a garbage can. Much like the archeologists, he criticises that “da plot lacks realism” but is proven wrong when the comic book’s seemingly fantastic content catches up with him. More than eight years after the publication of “The Oldest Man in the World,” then, Eisner would still decry and challenge the comic-book medium’s low cultural status.

^{xvii} Co-creator Joe Simon recalls that the concept of the series was originally based on a fictional version of Hitler himself, while Captain America was only conceived subsequently as his heroic counterpart:

“Here was the arch-villain of all time. Adolf Hitler and his Gestapo bully-boys were real. There never had been a truly believable villain in comics. But Adolf was live, hated by more than half of the world. What a natural foil he was... I could smell a winner. All that was left to do was to devise a long underwear hero to stand up to him” (Simon with Simon: 42).

Chapter 5ⁱ

The Post-War Market: Genre Diversity

The Superhero Genre

During the Great Depression, superheroes “dedicated to assisting the helpless and oppressed,” as the narrator puts it in *Superman #3* (1939), had provided escapism from the frustrations of economic hardship. During World War II, patriotic superheroes had created the popular illusion of a unified home front, assuring readers that, in the words of the Human Torch, “America is not in danger... It’s still the land of the free!” (*Marvel Mystery Comics #17*, 1941). Fictional violence tends to be popular at times of economic hardship and social turmoil, when it releases some of the psychological tensions created by real-life frustrations and fears; the generic plot patterns constructed around it allow consumers to manipulate their concerns until they lose some of their power. Once the Depression and war years finally lay in the past, however, most Americans were eager to leave their worries and struggles behind and devote themselves to a post-war lifestyle that at last offered some peace and comfort. The national economy was continuing its growth, promising an unprecedented level of prosperity. The mass construction of affordable suburban homes made a middle-class lifestyle affordable to millions, and government assistance programs such as the G.I. Bill enabled more citizens than ever before to get a college education. Heroic fights for political or social ideals, no matter how noble-minded, did not fit into this lifestyle and lost much of their popular appeal. Yet the superhero genre requires its protagonists to be faced with physical challenges that cannot be met by regular humans, for without such challenges these protagonists cease to be superheroes.

Desperately trying to provide Superman and his fellow heroes with a new purpose, the editors at **DC Comics** decided to surround their protagonists with a bright and colorful

fairyland devoid of any kind of socially or politically relevant menace. Instead the post-war superhero stories employ a more lighthearted tone, one that had already occasionally surfaced during the war when it functioned as escapism. The inevitable conflict with an opponent now takes on the form of a playful contest designed to discipline and neutralize the genre's aggressive charge. Viciously homicidal arch-villains like Two-Face or the Penguin are accordingly absent from the pages of the post-war Batman comics, and when the Joker makes a rare appearance in 1946's *Detective Comics* (DC) #114 he no longer represents an almost irresistible force of chaos or even the hero's homophobic nightmare, but merely comes out of semi-retirement for old times' sake, trying to please the fans he still believes he has: "Those were the days! But I've been lazy lately! No headlines for weeks! ...I'll challenge Batman to a game of wits for the amusement of my fans! Ha-ha-ha!" Similar developments can be traced in the other DC titles. Competitive but rather harmless "team sports" that de-emphasize social commentary dominate the *All Star Comics* series from #37 on, for example, as the heroic team, the Justice Society ("Justice will triumph!"), is challenged by a newly-founded team of villains, the Injustice Society ("Injustice will triumph!").

While DC's post-war comics avoid explicit social commentary, their heroes certainly epitomize political values. The ethical template that had been imposed on the stories with the establishment of the Editorial Advisory Board in 1941 not only remained firmly in place, but gained significance after the war. On the one hand, the depiction of physical violence is toned down still further and increasingly shown with cartoony overtones. On the other hand, the trend toward an uncritical portrayal of the status quo intensifies. The post-war Batman, for example, has been completely absorbed by the powers that be. Leaving his aggressive and confrontational pre-war identity far behind, he is now a well-adjusted citizen who has not only been sanctioned by the duly appointed forces of law and order but

even sports a diamond-encrusted platinum police badge (DC #105, 1945; DC #115, 1946). In sharp contrast to the DC comics of the pre-war era, material wealth is now *favorably* connoted to social and political power and celebrated as a prerequisite of superheroic activity: Robin sighs with relief once his partner's riches have been recovered: "Oh, boy! You're rich again, Bruce! (...) Batman and Robin can go on fighting crime and injustice!" (DC #105, 1945).

Gotham City, home of the Dynamic Duo, has lost its grim and gritty aspects and is now blessed with, among other splendid things, an infallible justice system and incorruptible journalists.ⁱⁱ The Batman's rebellious pre-war persona can only make a brief reappearance through the plot device of transporting him back in time and across the Atlantic to the medieval England of Robin Hood. Only in a place both temporally and spatially this far removed from post-war America, the plot suggests, is the Batman finally justified in confronting a member of the power bloc, the Sheriff of Nottingham: "In that case, it will be a pleasure to resist you!" (DC #116, 1946). DC's other post-war heroes of the time also act in cooperation with an idealized power bloc. When the Justice Society teams up with the U.S. government, team member Hawkman cannot help but express his admiration: "It's amazing what our government can do once it gets started, isn't it, Green Lantern?" His partner could not agree more (*All Star Comics* #51, 1950). Superman, once a passionate social crusader and militant antifascist, assumes the role of the privileged and conservative elder statesman.

In a sense, then, Gotham City, Metropolis, and all the other cities populated by DC's superheroes come to represent an idealized version of the superpower America has become. The superhero in turn personifies the ideal leadership perfectly able and willing to direct the fate not only of the United States, but of the whole restructured world. The hero's job description has changed from critic and challenger to member and protector of the status

quo, a drastic ideological shift that requires an equally drastic redefinition of the hero's character. Gone are the days of running riot and selfishly indulging in one's superior powers; as the United States emerges as a world superpower, DC's superheroes rise to the occasion by acting responsibly, by using their powers with restraint, and by directing their attention across foreign borders. The fantasy of a flawless status quo controlled by powerful and infallible leaders is not an unproblematic one, of course. Like any democratic society, post-war America was hardly free of inner strife. Until 1961, the poorest fifth of all families would still receive only five percent of the national income, while the richest fifth received forty-five percent. Millions of workers went on strike in the years immediately after the war (Zinn: 180-81). The notion that the obligations of a superpower are ultimately incompatible with basic constitutional values (as they require superheroic, that is, overwhelmingly powerful leadership and the repression of democratic diversity) foreshadows, it can be argued, the Cold War and its paranoid vigilance against Communism.

While the developments at most other publishers of superhero comic books were similar to those at DC, the stories produced by **Quality Comics** represented a notable exception. Already during the war, both "The Spirit" (which Quality Comics reprinted from the newspaper inserts) and "Plastic Man" had largely refused to join in the propaganda monologue that had dominated the popular landscape, and now both titles dared undermine the most popular post-war illusion, that of a flawless status quo controlled by infallible leaders. The Spirit, for one, remains personally on good terms with police commissioner Dolan, but is "not an official member" (10 Aug 1947) of the police force and considers himself above "police regulations" (14 Mar 1948). He reserves for himself the right to passionately disagree with various aspects of the justice system, particularly with the death penalty, and does not shy away from breaking the law to personally free two wrongfully convicted men from prison (4 Jan 1948; 20 Jun 1948).

The post-war America that the Spirit inhabits has no shortage of incompetent police officers (3 Aug 1947; 9 Nov 1947). What is more, it is described as “a mass of vice and corruption” run by “cheap political machine boss[es]”(28 Mar 1948) who buy votes and illegally influence police work (29 Feb 1948). Corporate greed and fraud are omnipresent; innocent lives are endangered in order to maximize profit. One corporation, for example, hires “the lowest, cheapest, most conniving, least scrupulous, most completely loathsome” criminal in a ruthless attempt to sabotage and literally “crush” the competition, causing this henchman to cynically praise the United States and its capitalist system: “What a land! Abounds with easy pickings... Ah... Free enterprise... It’s good to see what clean competition will do for the consumer!” (20 Nov 1949).

In this world of greed and corruption, the Spirit acts as a “20th century Robin Hood” (10 Jul 1949) who commits himself to protecting the powerless, most notably (ex-) convicts (see above) and children: “Grownups have all sorts of representation... Congressmen, senators, a president... but what of the kids of this nation???” (15 Aug 1948). To be sure, the Spirit himself is not infallible either: “Oooh, what a dope! I’m a fine hero! Fooey!” (6 Jul 1947). He is also not as focused on his redemptive task as his more conventional colleagues. While the classical monomythic hero renounces any temptation that might distract him from his mission, the Spirit occasionally needs a break from his crime-fighting routine and goes on vacation where he even rests his head on a female lap: “Sigh... ho hummmmm... A man sure needs the comfort of domestic life once in a while” (17 Aug 1947). Denoting the post-war era’s craving for comfort and relaxation, this is certainly not the kind of behavior or statement to be expected from the classical hero of the American monomyth that had been so popular during the Depression and war years: the monomythic hero who is required to remain constantly vigilant in protection of the hyper-masculine ideal, that is, to subordinate and reject the feminine which to him only represents a security risk.

The male superhero furthest removed from the ideals propagated by the American monomyth, however, remains Plastic Man. He not only, like the Spirit, occasionally needs a vacation but in 1946's *Police Comics* (PC) #52 dreams of a future "with no criminals to konk," one in which he can afford to completely abandon his superheroic identity: "That I'd like! I could relax and grow broccoli!" Lacking the conventional superhero's firmly defined "hard body" which indicates permanence and a stable identity, Plastic Man is condemned by the body that provides him with superpowers to constantly remain in motion without ever settling into any kind of permanent identity, a state the hero sometimes comes to regret: "I'm just a utility – like a rubber band or an eraser! Use me and then toss me aside like a broken balloon!" Even Woozy is unsure what his shape-shifting partner and friend is actually made of: "Uh – er – just between friends, Plas – are your insides made of rubber, too?" (PC #61, 1946).

The promise of infinite transformation on the one hand, and the lack of "hard" identity on the other, are described by Roland Barthes as the characteristic ambivalence of plastic:

"More than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation... It is less a thing than the trace of a movement. And as the movement here is almost infinite, transforming the original crystals into a multitude of more and more startling objects, plastic is, all told, a spectacle to be deciphered... But the price to be paid for this success is that plastic, sublimated as movement, hardly exists as substance. Its reality is a negative one: neither hard nor deep, it must be content with a 'substantial' attribute which is neutral in spite of its utilitarian advantages: *resistance*, a state which merely means an absence of yielding" (97-98).

From its beginning, *Plastic Man* (PM) has *resisted* many conventions of the superhero genre and of popular culture in general, and thus of society at large. Undermining patriarchal

notions of male and female identity has been one of the series' central elements of subversion, and when after the war the popular media by and large propagated a narrative of women retreating from the workplace and returning to the role of wife and mother, this very element of subversion becomes even more pronounced. While the conventional superhero's "hard body" aims to confirm the myth of a supposedly homogeneous (and, of course, superior) masculine identity by rejecting what contradicts it, that is, its own femininity, Plastic Man blurs the boundaries between the male and the female (PM #8, "The Homeliest Man in the World," 1947) and freely admits to his own feminine side, developing, for example, strong maternal feelings when confronted with a seemingly helpless baby (PC #61, 1946). By treating with irony the notion of a monomythic hero whose enhanced status derives from sexual renunciation and segmentation, then, the series promotes a reading position critical of the post-war attempt to draw the curtain over women's wartime achievements and return to pre-war gender roles.

The drawing style that lends itself to representing such objections to the dominant ideology, it has been argued in Chapter 3.3, is a cartoony one, as it subverts the realistic reading experience and creates room for intellectual reflection. Cole's style had always had a cartoony edge to it, one that opened up the superhero genre to oppositional readings by recontextualizing its most essential elements, but during the post-war period he pushed the envelope still further. Prefiguring the wackiness of the early *Mad* comics, his language became more and more restless and manic, his illustrations more and more exaggerated and zany, his characters more and more goofy and absurd. In 1947's *Plastic Man* #9, for example, the hero faces villains such as Clarence Skidd who calls himself "the King of Zing" or "big-time counterfeiter" Phony Fink who even counterfeits counterfeits.

Genre Diversity for a Wider Audience

While the superhero genre gradually fell out of popular favor, the comic-book medium as a whole was more popular than ever. Approximately forty million comic books were being published monthly once paper restrictions had been eased. According to the U.S. Army newspaper *Yank*, about seventy million Americans, roughly half of the country's entire population, were reading comic books in late 1945. Boys between the ages of six and eleven still represented a significant part of the audience; ninety-five percent of them were reported to be regular comic-book readers. Other demographics, though, were warming up to the new medium as well, as the comic-book audience now included eighty-seven percent of boys aged twelve to seventeen, forty-one percent of men aged eighteen to thirty, and sixteen percent of men over thirty. Moreover, ninety-one percent of all girls between the ages of six and eleven, eighty-one percent of girls between twelve and seventeen, twenty-eight percent of women between eighteen and thirty, and twelve percent of women over thirty were reading comic books regularly (Wright: 57).

Close to two hundred comic-book titles were published in 1947, twenty-five percent more than in the previous year. From 1947 to 1949, the comic-book industry proceeded to double its total output. By 1950, the monthly circulation of comic books was about fifty million, creating an annual industry revenue of over forty million dollars. A government-sponsored survey of an Ohio town in that year revealed that fifty-four percent of all comic-book readers were by now adults over twenty years of age, and that the average adult reader consumed about eleven comics each month. Almost half of all comic-book readers were now female. Estimates suggest that by 1952, between sixty and eighty million comic books were sold per month (Benton 1993b: 41; Benton 1993b: 40-48; Sabin 1993: 144-56; Pustz: 32-33). Without a doubt, comic-book publishers had successfully met post-war

demand and were reaching a wider audience than ever before – and increased product diversity was the key to their success.

Already in 1940, when the superhero genre was still dominating the market, the publishing house Street and Smith had experimented with a comic book devoted entirely to sports; Ralston-Purina and Hawley Publications had tested the western genre; and Fiction House had given war, science fiction, and jungle comics a try. Dell Publishing had introduced the first full funny-animal anthology, *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories*, and the series proved successful enough for the publisher to follow it up with further adaptations of Walt Disney and Warner Brothers cartoon properties. Late in 1941, a teenager named Archie had debuted in the pages of MLJ's *Pep Comics* (PEP) #22. In 1942, Catechetical Guild had entered the field with religious themes, and Lev Gleason had launched the first all-crime comic-book series called *Crime Does Not Pay*. In 1943, Dell had started Carl Barks' twenty-five-year run of original Donald Duck stories, and Marvel had debuted Basil Wolverton's *Powerhouse Pepper*, a spoof on the superhero genre that would be a major influence on EC's *Mad* and consequently on the underground revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Still, very few of these titles had been able to commercially compete with the superhero titles during the war, most notably MLJ's Archie stories.

According to estimates by Trina Robbins, the majority of Archie readers in the 1940s were girls aged six to thirteen (1999: 12). Young readers are generally not interested in stories about their own or a younger age group but in the next stage in life, and the young Archie readers of the 1940s were provided with a playful and uncomplicated (though not necessarily authentic) glimpse into their future. In 1942, Archie got his own title, *Archie Comics* (AC), followed by various spin-offs. Four years later, MLJ Publications acknowledged the overwhelming popularity of their most famous character by renaming themselves Archie Publications. During the second half of the 1940s, the Archie titles

spawned a wave of **teen comics**, comic books about teenagers' rituals of dating and hanging out with friends after school, establishing female readers as a much-courted target audience for comic books.

The concept of teenagers as an age group in its own right, that is, a group with its own characteristics and interests, has its roots in the growing high school population of the Depression years. Up until the 1930s, the vast majority of Americans in their teens worked in the strictly adult-controlled environment of the factory, the farm, or the home. Expected to obey adult authority while contributing to the family income, their role oscillated between childhood and adulthood. There was no self-contained stage of development located between these two spheres, and consequently there was no term referring to the teenage years as a self-contained period of life. This situation changed during the Great Depression. Unable to find work, sixty-five percent of all teenage youth were attending high school by 1936, by far the highest proportion to date. Most Americans in their teens were no longer working under adult supervision, but were spending an increasing amount of time amongst their peers. Removed from parental control, they learnt to look to one another for advice and approval, developing their own culture and thus revolutionizing the very concept of growing up.

By the decade's end, advertisers and merchandisers were beginning to identify and create a specialized market for this high-school crowd, coining the term "teenager" in the process. Teenagers were encouraged to proclaim their increased social independence through taste and style. Most of them still depended financially on their parents, and the products targeted at them – radio programs, pop music, magazines – accordingly represented a compromise between authentic teen interests and adult notions of what a teenager should be, a compromise that has become known as KleenTeen culture. An apotheosis of KleenTeen

culture, the magazine *Seventeen* debuted in 1944, and its circulation surpassed the million mark only a few months later.

The products of this KleenTeen culture aroused interest in preteens as well, of course, as they offered the prospect of an exciting future miraculously removed from both the dependencies of childhood and the responsibilities of adulthood. Archie comic books commercially exploited this preteen curiosity. Adjusting the content of KleenTeen culture to the minds of preteens, they represented teenagers as wholesome and fun-loving high-school conformists inhabiting a strictly symbolic world of dates and milkshakes. Archie tries to leave behind the sphere of childhood and establish himself as a “teenager” by driving his own second-hand “roadster” (PEP #25, 1942), by entering a “Battle of the Jitterbugs” (AC #30, 1948), or by slurping a milkshake at the local diner (AC #35, 1948). He tries to impress his neighbor Betty by balancing on a fence (PEP #22, 1941) and his schoolmate Veronica by taking her out to a restaurant he cannot afford (PEP #26, 1942). Ignoring the specter of teenage sexuality, angst, and “delinquent” behavior, Archie stories send the reassuring message to preteens that the life of teenagers is full of thrills and laughs and excitement, yet does not fundamentally differ from that of preteens; that teenagers struggle with the challenges of their world yet never suffer lasting negative consequences; and that preteens therefore have nothing to be scared of.

By the late 1940s, however, the teen comic-book mania began winding down, and by the late 1950s the Archie titles would be the only teen comics still going strong. The average age of comic-book readers was on the rise in the late 1940s. Teen comics had been designed to appeal to preteens, but the growing number of teenaged female readers was interested in what *their* near future might hold for *them*, and that was, they hoped, something decidedly more romantic than what the teen comics had to offer.

It was not until the end of the war that the comic-book medium's new genre diversity came into full bloom, as the superhero genre began to lose ground. For the first time since 1939, no significant new superhero titles were launched in 1946. By the end of 1953, DC's Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman would be the only major superheroes left on the stands. Conceived as a monomythic male redeemer altruistically sacrificing the sphere of the feminine for the sake of his heroic mission, the typical superhero of the Golden Age had been a permanently isolated figure marked by sexual renunciation. With the Great Depression and World War II in the past and high-school enrollment on the rise, however, the anti-social dimension of such hyper-masculine narratives lost much of its popular appeal. It was a time when the adolescent mind began wandering in different directions. An active social life assumed new importance, and popularity among peers became the measure of success for more teenagers than ever before.

Dating had outgrown its urban middle-class roots to become a widely accepted social institution and an essential element of American youth culture. The stakes were raised when marriage between the ages eighteen and twenty-four became highly normative during the post-war years. Discriminated against in the work sphere and widely discouraged from pursuing their own career, women had to get on with the task of getting married at a rather brisk pace or see their chances to marry, and thus to secure their financial future, decline. As "proper" behavior and "successful" dating promised to increase their chances of entering a satisfying marriage, female teenagers felt the need to gain the required social competence. Lacking experience in such matters, parents were unlikely to be of much help. Popular female narratives of the post-war years stepped up to the plate, claiming to teach such social competence.

Commercial instructional films had been around since the 1920s, but in the late 1940s and early 1950s some of them (such as *Are You Popular?* (1947), *Dating Do's and Don'ts*

(1949), or *What to Do on a Date* (1950)) began targeting the teen market. Around the same time, general interest magazines like *People Today*, *Life*, or *Cosmopolitan's* started regularly devoting articles to the social norms of dating. In 1947, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, the creators of the superhero Captain America only a few years earlier, demonstrated their sense of the changing market conditions when they effectively tapped into the desires of the teenaged female audience with the first comic-book series of the **romance genre**, *Young Romance*. Bearing the banner "Designed for the more adult readers of comics" on its cover, the title's combination of realistic settings and contemporary concerns proved particularly popular among young women in their teens. From 1948 to 1949, the number of romance titles jumped from four to 125. All of a sudden, romance comic books were outselling any other genre on the stands. By 1950, they represented twenty-five percent of the industry's output, indicating that comic books were no longer the domain of male preadolescents (Robbins 1999: 52-54).

Focusing on the rituals of courtship, the comic books of the romance genre commercially exploit the pressures attached to the social institution of dating during the post-war years. For the most part written and illustrated by men, they typically tell inherently didactic morality tales (often falsely advertised as "true stories") from the perspective of a female protagonist who has "learnt her lesson" about the trappings and faults of female initiative and independence. At the beginning of *Young Romance* #2's "Boy Crazy" (1947), seventeen-year-old Suzi rejects her aunt's advice to stop "playing with fire," insisting that she "like[s] to meet new boys." By the story's end, she has "learned her lesson through heartache." Like the dating system of their time, most romance comics insist on prescribed gender and family roles. They define love in terms of meeting role expectations, and reject the notion of a youth culture able to overcome them. Casting initiative and independence as exclusively male privileges, the code of romance dictates female passivity, leaving

unchallenged the male right to the public spheres of work, politics, and power. True and lasting female happiness is generally conceived to exist only in the domesticity of traditional marriage, and thus to depend on the woman's devotion to puritan self-denial, on her ability to abstain from too much excitement and pleasure.ⁱⁱⁱ

Suppressing criticisms of the damage inflicted by patriarchal power, the typical romance comics of the late 1940s and 1950s promise that there is safety and even a certain amount of power in dependence and subordination. They dream up a situation in which the female achieves power while remaining free of responsibility, as this responsibility is projected onto an idealized father figure. In *Western Love #2's* "Kathy and the Merchant" (1949), young Kathy initially resents Dan Adams, a "terribly large" and "utterly capable looking" individual who successfully runs his business "for profit – not friendship," making Kathy "feel a funny kind of helplessness." Though she learns that there is "something terribly conquering in his kiss," she rejects his further advances until her inability to independently run her own business forces her to ask him for financial support: "Right then, more than anything else in the world I wanted Dan to put his arms around me and tell me everything would be all right!" He does just that: "Kathy! You little fool! Come here! Dry your eyes Kathy! I'm going to take good care of you from now on!" Kathy replies: "Oh, Dan! I want you to!" She not only realizes that her economic survival depends on his privileged access to the spheres of work and power, but also that he really means well, that the patriarchal status quo is in her own and everybody else's best interest, that only her "ignorance and backwardness" had kept her from allowing him to show her "the way out of... poverty." Such regressive fantasies struck a chord with female readers of the post-war period, as they reassured them that women's return to the traditional role of wife, mother, and homemaker after the war was a positive, even natural development, not a cause for concern. Female happiness was presented as firmly linked to traditional marriage, to a strictly phallogocentric

conception of gender relations. The narrative strategy of appointing female protagonists merely served to hide the stories' patriarchal discourse, making women's return to traditional gender roles appear to be undisputed and to have no alternative.^{iv}

In the shadow of the meteoric rise of the romance genre, **western comics** gained considerable ground in 1948, entering a period of heightened popular success that would last until the mid-1950s. The archetype of the heroic cowboy had been around in American fiction since the turn of the century, but became a staple of popular culture only after World War II. Like most superheroes since 1941, the comic-book cowboy tends to embrace the status quo, coming to the aid of various representatives of the power bloc such as sheriffs, banks, and landowners. However, there are two elements to the myth of the cowboy that set it apart from the myth of the superhero, elements central to the western genre's popular appeal during the post-war years.

First, the archetype of the cowboy personifies traditional, pre-industrial values, values that had come under intellectual attack earlier in the century but started regaining popularity in the late 1940s. At the height of the Cold War, many Americans felt that their country's very identity was threatened by Communist infiltration, and longed for a solid foundation able to strengthen this identity. The myth of the Old West fictitiously provided this solid foundation in the form of a sanitized version of the country's origin, and the act of embracing this myth took on the meaning of patriotic affirmation of the "American way of life." Conveniently, an American identity firmly rooted in a mythical past can hardly be criticized or even altered, for it is based on larger-than-life assumptions. The Western genre was thus a perfect fit for the late 1940s to mid-1950s, a time when the "American way of life" was extolled as fixed and stable, as so entrenched that every call for change took on the meaning of disloyalty.

Second, the cowboy encodes the ability to read the realm of nature, a realm defined by the western to include both animal and human behavior. A heroic cowboy like Roy Rogers,

leading character of *Dell Four Color Roy Rogers Comics*, communicates effortlessly with his horse Trigger, instantly apprehending its nickering “call” (#63, 1945) and even its attempt at humor (“Trigger Trails the Herd,” 1947). When it comes to people, Rogers is able to unmask their character traits and intentions simply by “look[ing] into [their] eyes” (#63, 1945) – a much-desired ability in post-war America. In 1945, the House Un-American Activities Committee (originally called the Special Committee on Un-American Activities) was made a permanent investigating body, interrogating Americans about their supposed Communist connections and holding them in contempt if they refused to answer. In 1947, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9835, establishing the first general loyalty program in United States history. Disloyalty was defined as membership in or “sympathetic association with” an organization the Department of Justice labeled “totalitarian, fascist, communist or subversive... or as seeking to alter the form of government of the United States by unconstitutional means” (quoted in Zinn: 169). By the end of 1952, some 6.6 million persons had been investigated. Apart from the Communist Party and the Ku Klux Klan, organizations as diverse as the Chopin Cultural Center, the Committee for the Protection of the Bill of Rights, the League of American Writers, and the Nature Friends of America had come under suspicion of disloyalty by 1954. Though not a single case of espionage was uncovered, the broad scope of the investigation gave popular credence to the notion that the country was riddled with spies and had to be cleansed. Western heroes like Roy Rogers suggested that proper citizens have a “natural” ability to read other people’s thoughts and convictions, and are therefore natural allies in the government’s fight against Communist infiltration.^v

Jungle comics, many of them published by Fiction House, represent another commercially successful post-war genre. In the tradition of the Tarzan pulps, these comics construct an impassable symbolic boundary between racially constituted categories, a binary system of

representation designed to naturalize and fix the difference between belongingness and otherness. The whites who impose themselves on the jungle and its inhabitants are defined as both physically and intellectually superior to the primitive and mischievous natives who come in two varieties – animal-like and childlike. In the pages of *Jumbo Comics*, for example, the white jungle queen Sheena battles and defeats various jungle creatures whose hybrid identity is located on the border between human and animal: the furry and tailed “beast-woman of Zarga,” characterized by her “blind savage fury” (#93, 1946); a “kill-crazed madman... who [sees] through distorted, glittering eyes... the eyes of a killer cat” (#99, 1947); a flock of bat-like “brainless baboons” that cause Sheena to exclaim: “What strange beasts! Man or animal?” (#84, 1946). Plots ensure that all of these subhuman jungle creatures die violently at the story’s end. At the same time, Sheena devotes herself to protecting those native inhabitants of the jungle described as childlike and incapable of staying out of mischief, as superstitious and easily manipulated, primitive and in danger of reverting to the cannibalistic practices only recently outlawed – in sum: incapable of self-rule and thus in desperate need of Western rescue and guidance.

The racist assumption that Western forces have the natural right, even the moral obligation to control preindustrial societies served to endorse and justify America’s broadened imperial and colonial strategies and desires in the post-war world. To be sure, there had been numerous cases of American military intervention and colonization earlier in the century. World War II, however, increased the American public’s awareness of its government’s international involvements. Already when America’s entry into the war became more and more likely in the summer of 1941, *Jumbo Comics* #30 (published in August, four months before the U.S. would declare war on Japan) featured a story in which Sheena and her white male American partner are given access to the local tobacco market by a thankful native chief: “You our friends. I give you guides to the tobacco market!” A pleased Sheena

commends him: “I’m glad you came to know your real friends before it was too late... Now let’s forget what happened and live in peace...” As a thank you, in the story’s final panel Sheena and her partner give the native chief a little box of cigars made “from our tobacco.” Apparently unable to turn his tobacco into such fine cigars without American assistance, the chief is very thankful for this gift and euphorically announces: “We have great feast!” A cause for celebration, American imperialism is portrayed as beneficial to everyone (except the bad guys). Also in the aftermath of the war, the country’s imperial and colonial ambitions were widely promoted as the responsibilities of the world’s righteous new guardian and received little public criticism. Yet they did create a desire for popular justification, and *Jumbo Comics*, along with many other comic books of the jungle genre, provided it.

Last but not least, cover images of shapely white jungle queens and princesses dressed in bikinis played a significant role in the genre’s popular appeal for an audience that consisted largely of teenaged or older male readers. In order to comprehend the effectiveness of these images during the post-war years, one must understand that the bikini had made its first appearance only in 1946, and that a magazine like *Playboy* would not be around until 1953.

In conclusion, the vast majority of the American post-war comic books – be they of the superhero, teen-humor, romance, western, or jungle variety – express certainty about American virtues and values. Like other representatives of triumphalist post-war culture, they tend to celebrate conformity and articulate little or no interest in questioning or even challenging their own ideological assumptions. The preservation of traditional values at home and the spreading of the “American way of life” around the world are widely propagated, and the United States generally cast as the undisputed virtuous leader of the “Free World.” On the one hand, this popular celebration of the “American way of life” was

certainly an expression of increased national pride and faith in the future brought about by victory on the battlefield. On the other, however, the insistence on traditional virtues and values can also be diagnosed as an obsessive reaction to anxieties stemming from the difficulties of post-war adjustment.

Americans had to deal with the prospect of a generation of baby boomers reshaping the country in the not-too-distant future, with reports of juvenile delinquency spiraling out of control, with predictions of the demise of the family as a basic institution, with the dangers of life in the atomic age, and with the perceived threat of Communist world domination. Comic books had to address these issues, because cultural products can be popular only if they are perceived as relevant in their time. Most comic books, as we have seen, reacted to undercurrents of anxiety and doubt by providing the comforting illusion of a fixed and non-negotiable “American way of life,” the illusion of an identity that is immune to both internal and external subversion. Some comic books, however, addressed anxiety and doubt in a more direct way, and the first to do so were those of the **crime genre**.

Shot in a spiced-up documentary style, the commercially successful 1945 crime film *Dillinger* stirred up enough controversy to prompt the film industry to add the following section to the Motion Picture Production Code in 1947:

“No picture shall be approved dealing with the life of a notorious criminal of current or recent times which uses the name, nickname or alias of such notorious criminal in the film...” (quoted in Benton 1993a: 53).

As a result, real-life criminals would not be portrayed in the movies for the next ten years until *Baby Face Nelson* in 1957. Always ready to exploit its own status as cultural outlaw, the comic-book industry seized the opportunity and started specifically targeting the true-crime audience that had been deserted by the film industry. From 1947 on, the typical cover of a crime comic book promised “all true crime stories,” “real stories from police records,”

or stories “adapted from true police and FBI cases.” The lead stories of *Crime Does Not Pay*, the title that had pioneered the genre back in 1942 and was now one of the market leaders, began focusing on the portrayal of the very people movies were no longer allowed to deal with: famous real-life gangsters like John Dillinger or Ma Barker.

Promoting the sense of realism, many titles introduced nonfiction elements such as most-wanted criminal lists or crime-related quizzes. Photographs of gangsters or restaged crime scenes started replacing the customary cover drawings in 1948. The cover of *True Crime Comics* Vol.2 #1 (1949), for example, features a photograph highlighted by a huge arrow that reads: “This is a real photograph of a criminal at bay! The sensational story of Phil Coppolla, the most vicious criminal in Massachusetts’ crime history!” The rather difficult to decipher small print next to the image tells a different story, however: “Character posed by professional model” (Benton 1993a: 48). Going to great lengths in order to create the *appearance* of realism, the crime comic books of the late 1940s took considerable liberties when turning “true crime facts” into stories. While cases of bizarre and notorious real-life criminal activity did serve as springboards, the stories’ popular appeal relied heavily on their tendency to sensationalize and exploit the facts. Peppered with violence and eroticism, the stories’ factual content was usually limited to names, locales, dates, and the occasional biographical peculiarity.

In a half-hearted attempt to justify their exploitative content and appease critics, the stories were routinely dressed up as moral lessons, charitably designed to serve the public good by teaching readers that “crime does not pay.” Yet much of the stories’ popular appeal stemmed from the guilty pleasures provided by characters who *did* break the law, and whose biographies were presented as glamorous live-hard-die-young lifestyles. Until the final page, in some cases until the final panel, criminals were shown living it up, getting anything they wanted, and wreaking havoc in the process.

Stories starring female gangsters enjoyed particular popularity. Whether cast as active participants in murders and robberies or as the scheming seductresses behind the scenes, female criminals are typically shown to be driven by a profound dissatisfaction with the confines of the domestic sphere – the very sphere the romance comics of the time celebrated as the only source of true and lasting female happiness. In crime comics, female refusal to accept the traditional role of the housewife takes on the form of rampant materialistic greed that ultimately becomes the seedbed for criminal activity. The narrator of the story “The Woman Who Loved Life” from 1948’s *War Against Crime!* #6, for example, describes the protagonist like this:

“Being a policeman’s wife wasn’t Midge Calhoun’s idea of getting what she wanted from life. She liked furs... jewels... nice clothes... and hated the [drudgery] of her daily routine. And when opportunity offered Midge a chance to glut her abnormal cravings, she grabbed it with strong and greedy fingers! Robbery! Murder! Mayham!”

Crime Does Not Pay #61’s “The Electric Chair and the Murderess” from the same year features “a tigress of a woman, whose God was money and whose weapon was a gullible man, too weak and foolish to recognize that his ‘kitten’ was a man-killing beast.” *Crime Does Not Pay* #64, also from 1948, casts the Prohibition era’s gangster known as Machine-Gun Kelly as “a henpecked man” dominated by his greedy and scheming wife:

“Here was a woman, who conceived vicious bank robberies and ruthless, brutal kidnappings, which she forced through to a conclusion, largely through domination of her husband, who, in spite of his terrorizing name, would only bow to her fury!”

Adopting a phallogocentric conception of gender relations, textual agencies thus connote with greed and criminality the female attempt to challenge the traditional male right to the

public sphere of economic power. As in the comic books of the romance genre, the sphere of initiative and power is defined as a male privilege. Women must abstain from it as they must abstain from too much excitement and pleasure, or else suffer the consequences. In the final panel of the story "The Woman Who Loved Life," the reader learns that "the girl who loved life... found death! Crime does not pay!" The story "The Electric Chair and the Murderess" concludes with the execution of the female protagonist, and with a pleased narrator remarking that "her dream of luxury through murder expired." The wife of Machine-Gun Kelly is sentenced to life imprisonment. If the forces of the law do not manage to punish women who represent a threat to the patriarchal status quo, their male partners in crime do so instead, and in this case the women often become fodder for sadistic male urges that are exploited in graphic detail. An agent of patriarchal interests, such images were designed to serve the masculine ego's need to view the feminine as under constant male control.

Yet the textual promotion of traditional gender roles also indicates a nervous awareness among the genre's predominantly male audience that the patriarchal status quo can no longer be taken for granted. In fact, the society depicted in crime comic books, unlike the one presented by romance comics, is so vulnerable to subversion that it has drifted into turmoil. Breaking from the unwritten rule that required comic books to affirm the self-righteous complacency of post-war triumphalism, crime comics presented a world in which female dissatisfaction with the traditional female gender role has gotten out of (male) control, a world in which women wreck havoc by acting upon their dissatisfaction, a world in which the patriarchal status quo is crumbling.

During World War II, women had proven their ability to keep the economy afloat in the absence of men. Immediately after the war, the marriage rate had gone up and many women had returned to the roles of wife and mother. By 1948, however, women's labor

force participation was starting to rise again, exposing as an illusion the patriarchal hope that women would simply relinquish the ground they had gained during the war. From 1948 to 1960, the proportion of gainfully employed wives with children aged six to eighteen rose from twenty-one to thirty-six percent, while the proportion of those with children under six years of age rose from eleven to twenty-three percent (Modell: 221). The role of the self-sufficient woman was gradually becoming more socially acceptable, and the crime comics of the late 1940s reflect the patriarchal fears created by the early tremors of this development. The generic character personifying these fears is that of the femme fatale. Cast as an object of dread with the ability to manipulate and control the helpless male victim, the femme fatale symbolically threatens to bring about the downfall of patriarchy.^{vi} In “Susan and the Devil” from 1953’s *Crime Mysteries* #9, for example, the narrator describes the main character like this:

“Some people are born rich... Others have to work hard for a living... But Susan Buell found she could get by easily... because she could wrap any man around her little finger! She made rich old Jed Hawkins divorce his wife and marry her! Then she got Jed’s son Mark so infatuated with her that he killed his own father in order to possess her... But Mark never reaped the reward he had sought... He had served Susan’s purpose and she now turned her attention to his best friend... The horrible realization of his folly was too much of a shock for Mark to bear! He went into a fit of depression that culminated in his self-destruction!”

When Susan is finally and literally sent to hell, she is confident that she can “even charm the devil.” She has to learn, however, “what no human had ever suspected... The Devil is a woman!”

During the years 1948 and 1949, more than 160 million crime comic books were sold, representing about fifteen percent of the market (Benton 1993a: 45). As the crime market became increasingly competitive, the stories' violent imagery intensified. With titles like *Crimes by Women*, launched in 1948, publisher Victor Fox took the genre's exploitive tendencies to a new level. Even though there were no restrictions on selling comic books to children, Fox's *Murder, Incorporated* was promoted as "for adults only" on the cover. As the title's plots were simplistic even by comic-book standards and certainly did not require "adult sophistication" to be understood, these words could easily be understood as a promise of new excesses in the areas of brutality and violence.

The crime comics' anti-heroes conquered the newsstands at a time when the more wholesome superheroes were falling out of popular favor. These anti-heroes had hardly anything in common with the superheroes that preceded them, and they would turn out to be harbingers of an even less status-quo friendly kind of comic book: comic books that not only gave expression to the fears lurking underneath the surface of post-war triumphalism, but dared to address them without the typical crime comic book's self-righteous insistence on drawing a clear line between Us and Them.

ⁱ For this chapter, the following comic-book reprint anthologies were used: Barlow, J. (ed.) 2008; Benson, J. (ed.) 2003; Brevoort, T. (ed.) 1997; Christie, S. (ed.) 2008, 2009; Cole, J. 2003b, 2004, 2005, 2006; Eisner, W. 2003b-c, 2004, 2005a-b, 2006; Fox, G. et al. 2002, 2005; Fulop, S. D. (ed.) 2007; Gagné, M. (ed.) 2012; Kane, B. et al. 1998, 2001; Kitchen, D. et al. (eds) 2011; Saffel, S. (ed.) 2009; Siegel, J. and Shuster, J. 1989; Spicer, B. and Mason, B. (eds) 1993a-d; Trombetta, J. (ed.) 2010; Voll, D. (ed.) 1994.

ⁱⁱ When on one isolated occasion a mine owner for a moment loses sight of the common weal, he is immediately convinced by the Batman and Robin to turn the mine over to his benevolent son "to be used for the benefit of all of us." No punishment is required (*Detective Comics* #111, 1946).

ⁱⁱⁱ While most romance comic books endorse patriarchal values, there are a few, most notably the titles published by Archer St. John, that reject at least some of them. In the pages of these romance comics, teenagers realize that even short-lived pleasures can be of value: "Yes, I had learned my first lesson about love – the hard way. But I did not regret it. In spite of the tears and heartaches, it had been fun!" (*Teen-Age Romances* #3,

“Was I Too Young for Love?”, 1949). A woman who does not suppress her desires when she is “tempted to pursue a dangerous romance” finds happiness (*Blue Ribbon Comics* #4, “I Sat a Trap for a Wolf,” 1949); a woman’s decision to leave her “childhood sweetheart” for a “stranger” turns out to be the right one (*Teen-Age Diary Secrets* #4, “A Stranger Stole My Heart,” 1949); even a girl’s rebellion against her parents can have a positive effect (*Teen-Age Romances* #2, “We Couldn’t Be Kept Apart,” 1949). Still, romance stories like these were very much the exception in the late 1940s and 1950s, and the fact that they have recently been reprinted should by no means be mistaken as a sign for them being representative of their genre.

^{iv} Critical of the prescribed gender roles promoted by romance comics and most of American popular culture, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* offers a feminist reevaluation of womanhood. The book was originally published in Europe in 1949. Significantly, it would not reach the American market until 1957.

^v It should not be overlooked, though, that some heroic comic-book cowboys are much less clean-cut than Roy Rogers. Maurice Horn describes the reformed or misunderstood outlaw as another familiar heroic figure of the genre:

“The reformed outlaw is always pursued by the blind forces of society for his past trespasses, whether those are contrived (the hero has been framed for somebody else’s crime, as in *Lieutenant Blueberry*), or real but excusable (the hero had to kill in self-defense, as in *Kid Colt*)” (1978: 202-03).

The concept of a hero on the run from misguided authority figures could be read as a much more critical comment on the Red hunt of the time.

^{vi} The demonization of sexual temptation is a product of masculinity’s construction of femininity as a dichotomy between the Madonna and the whore, a polarity rooted in Christianity’s idealization of the figure of the mother on the one hand, and condemnation of sexual desire on the other. Psychoanalysis casts this masculine polarity as deeply problematic, arguing that a male person’s continued fixation on the mother after the onset of puberty indicates failure to transform childhood’s affection for the mother into sensual feelings for another adult woman.

Chapter 6ⁱ

EC Comics: A Different Approach

The “New Trend” Line

In 1947, William M. Gaines inherited his father’s struggling comic-book company, Educational Comics. His first business decision was to replace the poorly performing educational line with several rather conventional genre titles. In 1948, he hired Al Feldstein as chief writer, artist, and editor. After mimicking for two years with little success any formula that seemed to promise rising sales figures, Gaines and Feldstein decided to try something new. Gaines changed the company name to Entertaining Comics (or simply EC), phased out the titles that had merely followed the well-worn paths of established formulas, and instead launched the radically different and highly influential “New Trend” line.

Crime comic books, including Educational Comics’ own, had portrayed exploitatively the violence of a society depicted as awaiting moral indoctrination: in the end, that is, once the glamorized temptations of the criminal lifestyle had been amply savored, the reader was dutifully if off-handedly reminded that “crime does not pay.” As the genre-typical imagery became more and more exploitative, the hypocritically attached moral lesson increasingly appeared farcical and ludicrous. It was a time when people all over the world were trying to cope with the aftermath of Nazi death camps and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Could the horrors of this world really be contained by the reassuring set phrase “crime does not pay”? Gaines and Feldstein decided to drop such cautionary pretenses, and approach impudently and with a more open mind the subject of physical violence that crime comics had only dared superficially exploit. *Tales from the Crypt* (TFC; first three issues titled *The Crypt of Terror*), *The Vault of Horror* (VOH), and *The Haunt of Fear* (HOF)

in 1950 introduced the horror genre to the comic-book medium, and with it a new kind of terror far removed from the Gothic fantasies of the nineteenth century and instead centered on the American nuclear family. The titles' depiction of power and violence as threatening to the vulnerable individual marked a clear departure from the superhero genre's wholesome power fantasies, from its idealization of the invincible heroic body and its celebration of heroic violence. In EC's horror titles, violence was never heroic but always repugnant.

Wallowing in blood and gore, the horror comic books published by EC prior to the implementation of the Comics Code in 1954 represented a harsh rejection of the hierarchies of taste. They not only exploited their own commercially lucrative status as cultural outlaws, but took defiant pleasure in offending the allegedly "finer sensibilities" of the cultural establishment. Time and again, conventional notions of "good taste" were ironically confirmed only to be undercut and mocked in a parodic subtext. Tongue firmly in cheek, fictional versions of Bill Gaines and Al Feldstein announce that "all of our stories are trash" (TFC #31, "Kamen's Kalamity," 1952). The horror comics' fictional hosts, the so-called GhouLunatics, deprecatingly refer to "their" titles as a "melodramatic madness" (TFC #29, "A Sucker for a Spider," 1952), "disgusting drama" (TFC #36, "The Handler," 1953), "neurotic narrative" (TFC #31, "Buried Treasure," 1952), "infantile insanity" (TFC #39, "The Sleeping Beauty," 1953/54) or "revolting restaurant of reeking recitations" (HOF #25, "New Arrival," 1954).

Adult concerns regarding the effects of comic books on the young had previously been taken seriously by the comic-book industry. During the early stages of World War II, DC had made an effort to appease critics by redefining its heroes as establishment-friendly "role models" for children. Now EC not only dropped all pretenses of conservative indoctrination but ridiculed the increasingly hostile adult criticism of the medium. One of the horror titles'

fictional hosts, the Old Witch, provokingly introduces the story “New Arrival” (HOF #25, 1954) as “baby foods” and “perfect childish chewings slopped past your greedy gums to wet your appetite for... a disgusting dish...” Emerging charges linking comic-book consumption to criminal behavior became the target of biting satire and parody. In “Snow White,” the seven dwarfs are cast as collectors of EC comic books who end up murdering Snow White (HOF #22, 1953). In “Mournin’ Mess,” ghouls get the idea for how to meet their depraved wants straight from the pages of the series *Tales from the Crypt* (TFC #38, 1953). The Vault-Keeper’s introduction to “Split Personality!” casts readers as dangerous felons to whom the upcoming story represents merely a momentary distraction from their murderous ways:

“You, there! Put down that gun! Kill your mother-in-law later! And you, woman... stop! Your sleeping husband didn’t want that close a shave! And you, you fiend! Let those matches alone! Your little brother’s toes can wait! In other words, drop (dead, that is!) everything you’re doing, and listen...” (VOH #30, 1953).

Derogatory adult conceptions of youth and youth culture are stripped of their drapery of moralistic common sense, and instead revealed as intimately related to the discourses of age-based social and cultural power. In “Let’s Play Poison,” for example, a teacher’s perception of the young as alien, demonic Other reveals itself to be rooted in panic-stricken fears of declining adult authority and control:

“Sometimes... sometimes I actually believe that children are invaders from another dimension! Sometimes... sometimes I believe children are little monsters thrust from hell, because the devil could no longer cope with them. And I certainly believe that everything should be done to reform their uncivil little minds. You are another race entirely... your

motives, your disobediences. You are not human! You are... children!
Therefore, until such times as you are adults, you have no right to demand privileges or question your elders who know better..." (VOH #29, 1953).

A horror story published in EC's anthology title *Shock SuspenStories* (SSS), "...so shall ye reap!," exposes adult hostility towards "cheap lurid comic book[s]," routinely disguised as virtuous concern for the "healthy" development of the young, as the self-righteous and hypocritical exploitation of socially legitimized ageism. The very parents who forbid their adolescent son "to read this [comic-book] trash," pretending to be appalled by its exploitative depiction of violent crime, enthusiastically enjoy a newspaper article describing a particularly gruesome violent crime:

"Listen to this, Wilma. Last night, two unidentified men broke into the home of Mr. and Mrs so-and-so and while one of them held the husband prisoner in the bathroom, the other... you know... the wife. Then they killed her and fatally wounded..."

Wilma greedily replies: "Here! Let me see that!" (SSS #10, 1953).

Merged with biting social and political cynicism and a dark tongue-in-cheek humor, the horror stories published by EC took on anti-authoritarian meaning at a time when mainstream culture was expected to produce consensus entertainment, that is, conform to Cold War imperatives and promote American virtues and values as fixed and non-negotiable.ⁱⁱ

One of the titles' most effective narrative strategies of subversion can be traced back to the tradition of carnivalesque art as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin. Carnivalesque art, according to Bakhtin, is uninterested in illusionism and audience identification. Cutting off sentimental

participation in the spectacle, it casts its characters as puppet-like figures rather than human beings made of flesh and blood. Rooted in this tradition, the horror comics published by EC distance the reader from plot and characters by foregrounding the narrators, fictional hosts called the GhouLunatics. Their speeches, as the quotes above testify, are full of unorthodox alliterations that call attention to the narrative as artifact rather than unmediated experience, establishing a playful and disruptive relation to it. The stories' illusionary spell is not rejected entirely, to be sure, but frequently deconstructed by reflexive devices. When the Vault-Keeper addresses the reader, he demonstrates awareness of reader expectations as well as of his own role in the narrative. Breaking with art as enchantment, he points to the story's artificiality: "Oops! Almost forgot my 'heh, heh'!" (HOF #27, "Game Washed Out," 1954). Chopped-off heads are referred to as promising "story material" (TFC #27, "Horror! Head... it off!," 1952), a graveyard as "the usual place" to begin a story (HOF #7, "Room for One More," 1951).

The stories do not take the shape of unmediated events, but of interactions that require the reader's active collaboration in order to become meaningful. In the final panel of the story "Hyde and Go Shriek," the Crypt-Keeper jokingly comments: "Heh, heh. Poor Amy! She ended up splattered all over the sidewalk... I'm sure there's a moral here somewhere, but I'm too lazy to figure it out! No matter!" (HOF #20, 1953). Like in Bakhtin's carnival, audience imagination and participation is called upon to create meaning. Like in Bakhtin's carnival, the "gruesome" is treated comically; the taboo is broken; the scandalous comes to the center; laughter symbolically triumphs over death and momentarily liberates the reader from all that represses and restricts. Cheerful vulgarity undermines the pretense and hypocrisy of the powerful until a sphere of freedom emerges, one that transcends the borders between creator, text, and reader; the hierarchies of taste; and, on a symbolic level, the codes of the stratified society of the early 1950s.

While the horror genre was first introduced to the comic-book medium by EC's "New Trend" line, the topic of war had been addressed by comic books ever since the introduction of patriotic superheroes like the Shield and Captain America. However, comic-book publishers had not seen much commercial potential in the Cold War until Truman sent American troops to fight North Korea in June 1950. The conventional military conflict of the Korean War with its clearly defined enemy seemed to lend itself to patriotic comic-book propaganda. Before a cease-fire was agreed upon in 1953, more than one hundred war comic-book titles based on the conflict were published, while in the real world about two million Koreans, North and South, were killed (Zinn: 163-64) in addition to hundreds of thousands of foreign troops. In the tradition of the comic books dealing with World War II, propagandistic titles like *G.I. Joe* rendered North Korean and Chinese soldiers as distorted caricatures of purely negative, often sub-human attributes. Yet unlike those World War II comics, some war titles of the early 1950s occasionally offered a glimpse of the ugliness of war, portraying American soldiers as scarred by the conflict both physically and psychologically. Many of the titles' creators and readers had experienced the horrors of the Second World War first hand, and they were no longer interested in accounts of war as simplistic as the comic-book accounts of World War II had been.

The most ambiguous war titles on the shelves were the ones published by EC, *Two-Fisted Tales* (TFT) and *Frontline Combat*, edited, written, and occasionally drawn by Harvey Kurtzman. It should be noted that the final ten or so issues of both war titles, produced under the immediate threat of cancellation, fall back on genre conventions such as uncritical patriotism and the glorification of American soldiers. Until then, however, Kurtzman's stories subvert and deconstruct many of the assumptions that had previously constituted the war genre. War is depicted as a "dirty job" that neither lends itself to heroism nor allows for a convenient distinction between "good guys" and "bad guys." In

order to illustrate the human costs of war, most stories focus on the fate of individual soldiers, but at the same time rarely fall into the trap of predictable melodrama. U.S. soldiers are portrayed as capable of all kinds of objectionable deeds, while enemy soldiers are developed as fully-fledged human beings rather than reduced to stereotyped caricatures of purely negative attributes. Neither the soldiers' nationality nor their looks serve as reliable indicators of character. Moreover, the violence of war is never glorified or eroticized, but depicted as strictly repugnant. In "Corpse on the Imjin" the narrator foregrounds the contrast between the suffering of war and the superhero genre's signature exploitation of "heroic" violence: "Where are the wisecracks you read in the comic books?" (TFT #25, 1952).

EC's "New Trend" line was rounded out with two science fiction titles, a crime title, and an anthology. Published from 1950 to 1953, the science fiction titles *Weird Fantasy* (WF) and *Weird Science* (WS), as can be expected, envisioned space and time travel, robots, and aliens. Popular products must be relevant to the immediate social situation of their consumers, though, and EC's vision of the future is accordingly rooted in the social and political developments of the early 1950s. In 1949 the Soviet Union had detonated its first nuclear bomb, causing worldwide fears of a devastating confrontation between the East and the West. As the United States and the Soviet Union began a nuclear arms race, a growing number of Americans were critically reevaluating their country's use of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the final days of World War II. Yet still in 1951, General Douglas MacArthur proposed to stop the Chinese invasion of Korea by dropping "thirty atomic bombs or so" on Manchuria (quoted in Trombetta: 129). Many science fiction stories published by EC reflect these conflicted developments. "The Eternal Man" defines both the atomic bomb and the hydrogen bomb as inhuman devices, "revealing" that they have "actually" been invented by artificial intelligence, not by human beings (WS #14/3,

1950). In “Return,” the deployment of atomic bombs has uncontrollable consequences, triggering an arms race that ultimately results in atomic war and the destruction of all civilization (WS #5, 1951).

The rather naïve and uncritical power fantasies whose fictional fulfillment had been essential to the popular success of the superhero genre during the Depression and war years appeared increasingly problematic to many in the early 1950s. The story “Man and Superman!” of 1951’s *Weird Science* #6 illustrates this process of critical reevaluation, depicting the fantasies of physical power that are essential to the superhero genre as an allegory for America’s nuclear ambitions. The story’s main character, referred to by the narrator as a “physical culture expert,” has nothing but his own muscular physique and the upcoming Mr. America Contest on his mind. After experimenting with atomic energy in an attempt to increase his chances at the competition, he momentarily gains actual superpowers and becomes “a regular Superman,” a “real comic book character.” At the contest, however, the experiments cause him to waste away until he completely “disappear[s] in a burst of energy.” While obviously mocking a competing genre whose popularity had been fading since the war, the story metaphorically criticizes the decision to devote massive amounts of resources to the arms race as childish and ultimately self-destructive.

At a time when the military enjoyed tremendous prestige, EC stories repeatedly portrayed the decisions made by the United States Department of Defense as unreliable at best, irresponsible and incompetent at worst. In “The Invaders,” for example, the U.S. air force shoots and kills innocent peace-loving aliens seeking refuge (WS #9, 1951). In “Things’ from Outer Space,” the Secretary of Defense turns out to be an alien plotting to take over Earth (WS #12/1, 1950). In “Destruction of the Earth,” the American military accidentally destroys planet Earth by detonating an experimental hydrogen bomb (WS #14/3, 1950).

The anthology series *Shock Suspense Stories* (SSS) ran from 1952 to the end of 1954. It specialized in morality tales that exposed, critiqued, and satirized various aspects of political corruption, social inequality, sexism, ageism, anti-Semitism, racism, and misguided patriotism. Told in the form of horror, science fiction, crime, or “shock” stories with a twist ending, these so-called “preachies” illustrate that injustice, malevolence, and ignorance are an integral part of society and cannot always be blamed on the Other; they do not have to be of supernatural, alien, foreign, street-level, or communist origin. In the story “Hate!,” the reader is cast as an anti-Semitic villain:

“Your name is John Smith! You’re an American with a good American name! You’re a churchgoer... a family man... a respected member of your community... You hate them, don’t you John? You and your neighbors hate Jews...” (SSS #5, 1952).

Misguided patriotism and irrational hatred of communism have horrible consequences in “The Patriots!,” where a blind war veteran who does not salute an American flag he simply cannot see is suspected of communist leanings and beaten to death by an angry “patriotic” mob at a military parade (SSS #2, 1952). “The Guilty!” has a sheriff joining forces with a lynch mob to murder an innocent black citizen (SSS #3, 1952). In “Confession,” a corrupt police lieutenant violently enforces a false confession to cover up his own murderous ways (SSS #4, 1952). Daring to question the integrity of established American authority and the values and virtues it promoted at the height of McCarthyism, such stories were very much the exception in the popular landscape of the early 1950s. The controversy they stirred up is hinted at by some of the letters EC received and chose to publish at the time. One example reads:

“Dear Editors,

After reading ‘Confession,’ I was greatly disgusted with the story as a whole. First, it degrades a reader’s idea of the men who work to keep law and order as illustrated in the torture and brutality used in getting the ‘confession.’ Secondly, an innocent man HAD to confess himself guilty or else be beaten to death. It would have been just as well to say, ‘Crime does pay!’ May I suggest that in your stories you try to brighten, not darken, your readers’ views of our policemen, and put all punks, rats, and murderers where they belong... behind bars.

Clinton Day,
Westerly, R.I.” (SSS #6, 1952/53).

Other contemporary crime comics in the tradition of *Crime Does Not Pay* draw a clear line between Us and Them, between righteous citizens and the criminal underworld. Gangsters are shown to be destined for a criminal career from birth, the inevitable result of some fatal lack of character:

“Chuck Danner was brought up in a slum environment and was always trying to act tough – but deep down inside, he was a frightened kid! But you can’t blame his environment alone! If he had been any kind of man, he would have licked the poverty he was raised in...” (quoted in Benton 1993a: 25).

Criminals are conventionally depicted stealing candy or killing small animals as children before growing into remorseless and cold-blooded killers motivated by greed, hatred, or sadism. The protagonist of *Crime Does Not Pay* #57’s “The Wild Spree of the Laughing Sadist – Herman Duker” (1947), for example, kills his family’s canary and goldfish when

still a child, explaining simply: “I wanted to! It made me laugh! They look so funny dying with their eyes bulging out!” As a teenager, he drowns a dog and sets a cat on fire, until he finally “graduate[s]” to robbing and killing people “out of sheer pleasure – experiencing delight in others’ terror and agony.” Criminals such as Herman Duker are portrayed as disloyal, ruthless, and cowardly throughout their lives. They constantly talk in tough or slang terms, using expressions such as “shut your trap” or “hell” said by no other comic-book characters of the time. Lawmen, on the other hand, are cast as fearless and selfless do-gooders forced by incorrigible gangsters to take violent action. The integrity of the readers of such crime comic books is never questioned, and in 1945’s *Crime Does Not Pay* #24 the narrator explicitly addresses the reader as “one of those honest, patriotic Americans” who cannot be tempted by crime (Benton 1993a: 27).

In *Shock SuspenStories*, by contrast, criminality is shown to thrive in suburbia, no longer exclusively in seedy gangland underworlds. The suburbs’ predominantly white middle-class population was rapidly growing during the early 1950s, a development that metonymically illustrates the decade’s desperate attempt to escape from social change by creating the mirage of a perfectly unsuspecting and therefore unchallenged status quo. The middle-class family, explicitly idealized in most romance comics and implicitly constructed as a flawless American institution across popular media, is repeatedly depicted in the EC comics as dysfunctional, a source of aggression and even murder (SSS #2, “Kickback!,” 1952; SSS #5, “Cold Cuts!,” 1952; SSS #8, “Piecemeal,” 1953).ⁱⁱⁱ Wedding vows are taken for money, not love (SSS #6, “Dead Right!,” 1952/53; SSS #12, “Fall Guy,” 1953/54). A father obsessed with discipline does not shy away from sacrificing his own son for his inhuman ideals (SSS #1, “Yellow!,” 1952). A baby murders its parents (SSS #7, “Small Assassin!,” 1953). A tyrannical husband with “a perverted mania of orderliness” makes his wife’s life miserable (SSS #1, “The Neat Job!,” 1952). Desperately jealous husbands murder their gainfully

employed and increasingly self-sufficient wives (SSS #7, “Beauty and the BeachI,” 1953), while in “Made of the Future!” from *Weird Science* #5 (1951) “the perfect wife” who “never nags... never argues... doesn’t object to your staying out late with the boys... always smiles... cooks divinely... sews... adores you completely... obeys your every command” turns out to be a robot rather than an actual human being.

***Mad* and the History of Comic-Book Reflexivity**

Even though the war and science fiction titles barely paid for themselves and occasionally depended on the financial surplus provided by the suspense and horror titles,^{iv} Gaines by 1951 had managed to overcome his inherited financial difficulties and turn EC into a profitable, if small, publishing house. Feldstein was editing and mostly writing no less than seven of the nine EC titles at the time; his horror comics, with a circulation of about 400,000 each, were far and away the most popular titles of the “New Trend” line, spawning dozens of knock-offs from other publishers over the following years.^v In contrast, Kurtzman’s hands-on editing and meticulous historical research proved so time-consuming that he was left only with the two war titles. As Gaines paid his editors on a per-issue basis that did not take into account the time invested in the production of an issue, Kurtzman’s income was considerably lower than Feldstein’s. When Kurtzman complained, Gaines suggested the addition of a new, less work-intensive title. Kurtzman came up with the concept for a series that would require little research as it poked fun at something Kurtzman was surrounded with every day anyway – comic books. Spoofing predominantly EC’s own “New Trend” titles, the first issue of *Mad* reached the newsstands in the late summer of 1952.

The opening pages of the premier issue’s four stories all feature the exact same page layout, and in each story a character named Melvin appears who has nothing but his name in

common with the others. Calling attention to the text as artifact rather than unmediated experience, the narrative insignificance of such recurring elements sets the tone for the series: reflexivity meets absurdist humor. *Mad* #4 launches “Superduperman,” a thenceforth regular feature that pokes fun at the very nature of the power fantasies Superman was designed to fictitiously fulfill. The alter ego of Superduperman is Clark Bent, a tattered and doltish individual who works as an assistant to the copy boy at the newspaper Daily Dirt, earning no more than seventy-five cents per week. Girl reporter Lois Pain, the appropriately named femme-fatale counterpart of Lois Lane, not only routinely rejects his advances, but physically abuses helpless Clark Bent. While the Superman stories’ timid and clumsy persona of Daily Planet reporter Clark Kent merely functions as a disguise of the protagonist’s true heroic identity, Clark Bent cannot help being a pitiful character. Even as the overly muscled Superduperman he remains a boneheaded and pathetic copy of Superman who does not shy away from misusing his x-ray vision to spy on “those ladies in the powder room across the hall.” While Lois Lane adores Superman, Lois Pain snidely remarks when she discovers Clark Bent’s alter ego: “So you’re Superduperman instead of Clark Bent! ...Big Deal! Yer *still* a creep!” Villain Captain Marbles, a corrupt and equally addlebrained version of Captain Marvel, literally has to knock himself out to accord Superduperman his generic victory at the story’s end.

“Superduperman” was *Mad*’s first major popular success, indicating the enormous commercial potential of stories that identified and mocked the concepts and norms of well-known comic-book genres and characters. In the early 1950s, the vast majority of people in their late teens and early 20s had grown up with superhero comics and knew them well, but felt they had outgrown the genre. At a time when fear of an atomic war was on the rise, many were uncomfortable with the genre’s naïve power fantasies and felt the need to dissociate themselves from them. *Mad*’s “Superduperman” rewarded familiarity with the

superhero genre while at the same time providing the reader with the opportunity to laugh away many of its outdated ideological implications. Superman was not the only superhero with the potential to be spoofed, to be sure. Popular culture's reliance on excess, formulas, and superficiality generally offers many opportunities for parody and subversion, and before long the parodies of Superman were accompanied by those of Wonder Woman, Batman, Plastic Man, and others.

Mad's highly subversive reflexivity contrasted sharply with the reassuring forms of reflexivity that had been characteristic of most early superhero titles. During the medium's so-called Golden Age, comic-book narrators typically encouraged the reader to adopt a reading position unfettered by critical distance, and instead marked by emotional involvement and identification: "Cross your fingers, folks!" (Superman #3, 4th story, 1939). Once in a while, the hero rewarded the reader's assumed naïve dedication to the narrative when, shifting between diegetic and non-diegetic roles, he momentarily stepped out of character to directly address the reader. In *Detective Comics* #46 (1940), for example, the Golden Age Batman bids devoted readers farewell by offering a "steady relationship" across the border that separates fiction from reality:

"Thanks for being with us again this month! Robin and I look forward to these little get-togethers with all you readers every month in *Detective Comics*! Let's make it a standing date!"

When the Golden Age Superman knowingly winked at readers in *Action Comics* #56 (1943), he not only explicitly recognized their presence or let them in on a joke, but invited them to be his confidant, pointing to a special understanding between himself and the reader. Clearly, the suggestion of such closeness between reader and hero advanced a reading position marked by emotional involvement rather than critical distance.

In *All-American Comics* #17 (1940), the plebeian alter ego of the recently introduced Green Lantern, Alan Scott, comments on the well-founded rumor that a new superhero calling himself Green Lantern has appeared in Metropolis: “Sounds too much like a comic book character to really exist! Things like that don’t happen these days! Utterly fantastic!” Well aware that Alan Scott himself *is* the Green Lantern and that “utterly fantastic” superpowers are *to be expected* in the fictional universe of a superhero comic book, readers were encouraged to embrace the genre’s fantastic prerequisites rather than to critically reflect on them. Moreover, superpowers were treated as a firmly established element not only of the superhero genre but of the comic-book medium as a whole, and readers were accordingly invited to subscribe to the equation of comic books with the superhero genre – an equation designed to promote rather than critique the superhero genre as a whole.^{vi}

Even the obvious gap between the reader’s real-life situation and the fictional superhero as personified wish-fulfillment occasionally became the target of humorous commentary in early mainstream comics. Johnny Thunder, who would eventually become a member of the Justice Society of America, has the mindset of a child, and his heroic ambitions are originally played for pitiful if benevolent laughter. He is a good-natured but fearful, inexperienced, and clumsy young man initially unable to control his extraordinary powers. Yet, much like the preadolescent reader whose reading experience is primarily marked by identification, he has lofty dreams about being a member of the Justice Society of America. When walking past a newsstand selling comic books based on his heroes, he expresses his frustration: “Say, you’d think those guys would invite me! But no – nobody ever thinks about me!” (*All Star Comics* #3, Justice Society section, 1940).

Herman the Heroic of *Superman* #20’s “Lair of the Leopard!” (1943) is another well-meaning but misguided aspiring hero intended to provide comic relief by adding human frailty to an otherwise strictly elevated concept of heroism. Describing him as the “two-

fisted whacky wonder” and as “the Man of Steel’s most unique but exasperating foil,” the narrator predicts the reader’s reactions to Herman: “You’ll love the guy for his foolhardy courage and daring – but his ineptness when he is most eager to make good will infuriate you.” His ineptness is expected to infuriate readers, one might assume, because it reminds them of their own weaknesses and of the gap that exists between themselves and Superman. Like Johnny Thunder, Herman the Heroic provides readers with a far less idealized projection of their abilities than is common in the superhero genre. Like Johnny and the reader, he longs for the superiority of a fully-fledged superhero, avowing his hero worship to Superman: “I’m one o’ yer most ardent admirers! An’ – I – I wanta be just like you!”

In contrast to *Mad*’s Superduperman, however, both Johnny and Herman are provided with the ability to learn and eventually master the challenges of their respective heroic missions, thereby avoiding alienating readers looking for and expecting fantasies of wish fulfillment in the pages of *All Star Comics* and *Superman*. Parodying, that is, comically refunctioning the Superman text and the genre it created, “Superduperman” debunks the power fantasies that this genre provides as chimeras rooted in feelings of inferiority and powerlessness. The stories that feature Johnny Thunder and Herman the Heroic, in contrast, do not parody conventional superheroes or the genre they represent. They never cast any doubt on the superhero concept itself; if anything, they make their generic counterparts appear even more heroic.

Reflexivity had also been a major ingredient in the stories featuring the Spirit, Plastic Man, and Wonder Woman, as we have seen, but even when these stories were pushing and redefining genre boundaries they had all still accepted the most basic conventions of the superhero genre. The intertextual references that make up *Mad*, by contrast, are no longer located within the boundaries of any existing genre. Creating additional room for intellectual reflection and subversion by widening their distance from generic pretensions

of realism, they ultimately take over every aspect of the text to become a new genre, a highly subversive and socially disruptive genre meant to embody otherness. *Mad's* wildly outrageous visual style took the cartooning of Will Eisner and Jack Cole one step further. Its unpredictable mix of aggressive scrutiny, slapstick humor, running jokes, and visual puns discloses the discursive nature of various popular fantasies, opening up oppositional reading positions that undermine the fantasies' conventional rules, while refusing to provide an authorial point of view that would valorize one discourse above all others.

By appropriating the icons and artifacts generated by the commercial market and by symbolically reworking them to take on new and subversive meanings, *Mad* in its early years contested a new kind of cultural space for its readers, a space referred to as "abnormal" in an advertisement running in *The Haunt of Fear* #19. *Mad's* style of cartooning during the first half of the 1950s became the symbolic property of confident and rebellious young consumers who gained pleasure from rejecting many of the norms dictated by an increasingly conservative establishment, norms that had been internalized by popular culture at large. The slogan on the covers of *Mad* read "Tales calculated to drive you MAD," and the term "mad" could not only be given the meanings of "extremely foolish," "mentally disturbed," "frantic," or "infatuated," but also of "angry" and "enraged." Before EC came along, popular pleasures this blatantly indicative of cultural insubordination simply had not existed in post-war America.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the growing commercial success of the EC line and of the host of imitators it spawned was perceived as an impudent affront by mainstream society, especially at a time when almost any objection to the status quo was perceived as suspicious. The following letter sent to EC by a concerned mother of three and published in *Vault of Horror* #25 aptly illustrates typical adult mainstream reactions to the publisher's line of comics:

“To the editors of E.C. magazines:

... From time to time, my elder son has brought home copies of your shameful and horrid magazines. With the writing of this letter, I have also forbidden him to read any of them in the future. First of all I realize that you're in business to make money, but that's no reason for you to print such filth to contaminate the minds of children. Your horror books are disgraceful, and your 'science' books and war books aren't much better. Only a low type of person could derive any enjoyment from such trash. How you can call them 'comic books' is beyond me. I'm sure that if there were less magazines like yours, there would be less crime and juvenile delinquency in this country. I heartily agree with attempts to outlaw 'comic books' such as yours.

Mrs. Arline Grandon Phelan
Kansas City, Kansas.”

The Rise of Comic-Book Fandom

The narrative element of reflexivity, as we have seen above, had been around in one form or another since the medium's early years, and would come into its own with the publication of *Mad*. It was first introduced to the EC line in the summer of 1950 with the “Love Story to End All Love Stories,” published in the final issue of the previously strictly illusionist romance series *Modern Love*. Poking fun at a comic-book publisher's desperate attempt to cash in on the medium's latest formula for success (Reidelbach: 13), the story can be read as a satirical and decidedly unsentimental farewell to the kind of product EC and other publishers had been putting out routinely over the last few years. As such, the story not only calls attention to its own status as artifact but allows the reader a revealing peek into the

process of mass production. Distancing itself from the typical generic comic-book story of the day, the story invites the reader to join EC in its attempt to open up conventional comic-book production and storytelling to new horizons.

The production process at EC itself would be depicted for the first time in the story “Horror beneath the Streets,” published shortly after the cancellation of *Modern Love* in the third issue of *Haunt of Fear*. It features fictionalized versions of Gaines and Feldstein having just completed an issue of *Modern Love* and discussing the economic viability of a horror series. Feldstein is skeptical: “Nah! Our readers wouldn’t go for horror stories... Nobody believes that kind of trash!” The “persuasiveness” of the GhouLunatics is needed to convince them otherwise, as the editors on their way home from the office are ambushed by the three fictional hosts of the horror titles and scared into signing contracts guaranteeing the publication of “their” tales.

In the early 1950s, such an appearance of fictionalized versions of comic-book creators in a story was unusual. Self-portrayals of comic-book creators had previously been rare for two reasons. First, the comics of the Golden Age were primarily targeted at preadolescent and young adolescent consumers whose reading pleasures tended to be based on identification with the hero. The appearance of the stories’ creators would have called attention to the story’s status as artifact and thus undermined the pleasures of identification.^{vii} Second, most comic-book artists and writers viewed their own profession negatively and with embarrassment. Toiling anonymously and for little pay on corporately-owned characters and formulaic stories considered disposable and culturally worthless at best by the vast majority of adults, they avoided being publicly associated with comic books. As a result, they were highly unlikely to portray themselves on their pages. Both of these reasons, however, were rapidly losing their relevance for the comic books published by EC during the early 1950s. Not only did EC’s “New Trend” line target an audience looking for reading pleasures

vastly different from those that had been in demand during the late 1930s and 1940s, but the publisher also attempted to provide this new brand of reading pleasure by creating a new kind of work environment, one far removed from the humiliating working conditions that had previously been the industry norm. As both of these factors were fundamental to the rise of comic-book fandom, I will now examine them in more detail.

Television started conquering American households in the early 1950s to quickly become the most popular of all popular media. Already by 1953, half of all American families owned a television set, and the percentage went up to nearly three-quarters of all American homes over the following two years. Still targeted primarily at adults and thus exploiting common adult fears of everything off-center, early television became a custodian of the cultural Cold War.

Many teenagers and young adults found themselves at odds with the complacency about social conditions that television and other popular media propagated. They belonged to a generation that had experienced an extraordinary level of responsibility as well as freedom from parental control in their preteen or teenage years, when their fathers had gone off to war and their mothers to work. They had helped keeping farms, factories, and local businesses afloat, many older ones had been engaged in battle themselves. In the process, these young people had established a distinct social and cultural identity beyond parental control, and they were not willing after the war to relinquish the territory they had gained. From the early 1950s on, their appetite for independence was supported by economic developments, as the reconfiguration of traditional labor markets created part-time employment opportunities, boosting their spending power. Confident and rebellious young people were emerging as an increasingly attractive prospect to the market, and they were not settling for the products of a KleenTeen culture characterized by its willingness to

compromise with adult notions of appropriate entertainment for the young. Social power structures were starting to shift, and marketing strategies had to be adjusted.

EC was one of the first marketers to specifically target the growing disposable income of young people, spearheading the rapid expansion of a youth market that would revolutionize popular culture from the mid-1950s on.^{viii} The comic books published by EC marked a major stride toward the autonomy of youth culture beyond parental control. In contrast to the comic books of the Golden Age, EC's "New Trend" comics were targeted at teenagers and young adults of both genders, specifically at those who were looking for ways to contest their own cultural space in opposition to the then-prevailing popular consensus, seeking products that would give expression to their dissatisfaction. The culturally deviant comic books published by EC not only resonated with this alienated young audience, but discovered its discontentment as a marketable commodity.

Unlike their Golden Age counterparts, EC readers were not looking for an intact fantasy universe and the pleasures of identification such a universe can provide. Instead, they were looking for a product that reflected their felt alienation from the cultural status quo. Humorously reworking the alienation devices previously employed by Berthold Brecht and the leftist avant-garde, EC comics did just that. As the process of artistic production was foregrounded, the realist illusion that fictive events were not "worked at" but simply "happened" was undermined; the charm of the spectacle was broken. A reading position marked by intellectual reflection was promoted, an anti-illusionism critical of the kind of mystifying, narcotic, politically demobilizing culture that dominated the decade.

Looking back, Al Feldstein takes particular pride in the fact that the creators at EC "always wrote to [their] own level" (quoted in Wright: 136), reaching teenagers and young adults like themselves by taking them seriously. In order to enable creators to write and draw to their own and their peers' level while ignoring conventional adult preconceptions of what

young people *should* consume, publisher William M. Gaines developed a work environment in sharp contrast to the industry norm.

By the late 1940s, most publishers were producing their comic books in-house rather than ordering them from shops. The industry was growing and a second generation of comic-book creators was attracted to the field, young writers and artists who had grown up reading superhero comic books but whose attitude towards the medium differed greatly from that of the previous generation. To them, creating comic books was no longer merely a way of surviving economic hardships but held the promise of personal expression. They had not experienced the disheartening conditions of the “sweat shops” and saw no reason to suppress their creativity. There were, however, very few avenues available for the expression of new ideas, as most publishers insisted on the tight grip they had established on their product as well as on conditions of employment during the Depression years.^{ix} Publishers of popular products, after all, are interested first and foremost in profitability, not in fostering creativity, and the safest way to ensure profitability is to comply with established formulas.

The role of the publisher was conventionally limited to the financial side of the business. Gaines, by contrast, took an active part in the creative process, providing the original springboards for stories. Writer Feldstein would reject the majority of these springboards, but script the ones he accepted. He would then sit down with the artist whose style he considered a match for the story’s requirements and talk over the basic ideas the artwork was supposed to convey. Feldstein remembers: “We’d talk, but I’d never tell anyone how to do it... I didn’t want to inhibit [the artist] in any way. I never insisted on layouts because I think it takes away some of the creativity” (quoted in Diehl: 52). All specific interpretation was left up to the artist, an aspect of the production process that greatly increased the artist’s creative freedom.

Recognizing that the drawing style of an artist, much like the acting style of a film star, could become a marketing tool designed to generate certain expectations among potential customers and thus ensure commercial viability, Feldstein encouraged the artists to develop their own styles, to identify with and take pride in their work. Comic-book artists at the time were not granted copyright ownership over their creations, and in this respect the artists employed by EC were no exception. However, their promotional value was discovered. They were given credit for their artwork, they were celebrated in regular “artist spotlights” providing photograph portraits along with thumbnail biographies, and they were paid the highest wages in the industry. As a result, EC quickly became a magnet for the most ambitious and talented artists in the field.

It was essential to the work environment at EC that employees were not treated as interchangeable parts of an anonymous machine, but as valuable members of a creative community that almost resembled a big family. Father figure Gaines, for example, would invite the members of his “family” to vacation together in foreign countries once a year, covering all expenses himself while deliberately cultivating an ambience of camaraderie and one-upmanship.^x It was an ambience in which friendships developed among co-workers, as Harvey Kurtzman remembers:

“Not only did we work together, but we played together, we picnicked, we had dinners at our houses, we were socially active with each other as well as being active with the work” (quoted in Reidelbach: 20-21).

This unconventional work environment found expression on the comic-book page as well. In “Dream of Doom,” a publisher named Gill Baines (rather than Bill Gaines) calls new pages of artwork one of his employees has just brought in “fantastically wonderful,” enthusiastically presenting them to the other artists who all applaud their beauty (WS #12, 1952). The story “Garden Party” features thinly-disguised fictional versions of the EC

staffers barbecuing and having a good time at one of their suburban homes (HOF #17, 1953). The one-pager “An Intimate and Informal View of the Entertaining Comic Group Hard at Work” presents childlike caricatures of all crew members crowded into one tiny office room and so enthusiastically absorbed in their collective efforts that fiction and reality have joyfully merged for them (TFC #45, 1954/55). Connoting the creation of EC comics with a party or with the playing experience of a child, such texts – despite their ironic undertones – offer an indulgent idealization of the production process that was constructed as a source of pleasure not only for the employees at EC, but also for the readers. Advertisements for the first issue of *Mad* feature a fictionalized version of Bill Gaines lovingly describing the new product as “our latest baby”, and the title’s contentedly smiling creators “entrusting” this “baby” to the reader, inviting the reader to join the family and participate in its joyful and fulfilling collaboration (HOF #15, 1952).^{xi}

EC’s elevation of the comic-book artist has been compared by Russ Cochran to MGM’s development of the “star system” in the movie industry of the 1930s and 1940s (Diehl: 49), and there can be no doubt that both companies created a new significance for their employees’ profession. However, there are profound differences between the two approaches. When EC started turning the spotlight on its artists, constructing them as stars meant to be adored from a distance was simply not an option. Neither their rather average looks nor their lowly regarded profession made them “adorable” or even “desirable” for most readers. Instead, EC fell back on the strategy of casting its creators as the reader’s buddies. The reader was invited to enter a compact of virtual friendship with the creators, a relationship that promised to provide the reader not only with the opportunity to admire the creators’ skill and passion, but also to laugh at the particularities and oddities of their backgrounds, personalities, and work environment. The story “Undertaking Palor,” for example, pokes fun at Harvey Kurtzman’s perfectionism, casting him as a murderous

undertaker who refuses to leave anything to chance, even death (TFC #39, 1953/54). “Man from the Grave” ironically traces the career of Wally Wood as a development from ambitious painter without commercial success to successful horror-comic artist without scruples. In order for him to enter what is ironically portrayed as the deranged state of mind needed to work in the horror-comic genre, the plot demands that he become a mass murderer (HOF #4, 1950). Fictionalized versions of other EC horror regulars such as Jack Kamen, Graham Ingels, Johnny Craig, and Jack Davis are not pushed to the same extreme, but are still required by the plot of “Kamen’s Kalamity” to “fall into the spirit” of sadism in order to function as horror artists (TFC #31, 1952). Moreover, the GhouLunatics routinely ridicule the artists’ passionate devotion to a medium that at the time held little social prestige, referring to them as “the batty-boys at E.C.” and to their artwork as “trash.” The Old Witch does not fail to point out, though, that “anybody who buys this nauseating nonsense must be as bad off as the creeps who draw it” (TFC #43, “Accidents and Old Lace,” 1954), casting artists and readers as united in their subversive assault on “reason” and “good taste.” Such unduly hyperbolic information about the EC creators established a tone of jokey domesticity that served to diminish the distance between reader and creator. Readers were given the impression that they had entered an intimate and exclusive relationship with the creators, that they had been let in on an inside joke which, apart from the creators, only devoted readers could understand.^{xiii}

The notion of an intimate relationship between creators and readers was not just suggested by the narrative but made explicit in the editorial text, where readers were addressed as members of the “EC family”: “As you know, we have always considered you, our readers, more than mere customers... rather we have considered each and every one of you an integral part of the E.C. family” (SSS #7, 1953). Readers were constructed as part of an alternative community not defined in terms of age, class, race, or gender, but rather

through the readers' common relationship to their popular product of choice. At a time when mainstream society was paralyzed with fear of social change, desperately clinging to established power structures, demand for a more open-minded and flexible community was high, especially among teenagers and young adults. Still largely targeted at adults, the dominant culture of the early 1950s celebrated the traditional, strictly hierarchical family as a bulwark against social change. The "EC family," by contrast, was conceived as a much more democratically inclined community, as an alternative to the traditional family. EC readers were not relegated to the status of passive consumers at the mercy of all-powerful adult producers, but encouraged to freely express their views, even to influence the ongoing production of EC titles. They were encouraged to be productive "family" members, that is, to become fans.

For the purpose of analyzing comic-book fan productivity, the theories of John Fiske prove useful, particularly the categories of "semiotic productivity," "enunciative productivity," and "textual productivity" he proposes. Fiske defines semiotic productivity as the essentially *interior* "making of meanings of social identity and of social experience from the semiotic resources of the cultural commodity," and consequently as characteristic of popular culture as a whole. Enunciative productivity, typically fan talk, is described as the *exterior* "generation and circulation of certain meanings of the object of fandom *within the local community*" (emphasis added) that is not put on record and therefore "exists only for the moment of speaking" (1992b: 37-39). Like semiotic productivity, this type of fan productivity cannot be retrospectively substantiated, but, also like semiotic productivity, it has certainly always been inspired by comic books and popular culture in general. For a national fan community to develop, however, the experience of media consumption needs to be transformed into textual productivity, productivity that can be circulated among and help define the wider fan community. Fan culture is not only about the production of

meanings, but also about their proposal and public display in published letters or fanzines, about the discussion and negotiation of interpretations and evaluations in fan club meetings or at conventions (or, more recently, on Internet blogs and message boards).

All popular audiences, then, engage in semiotic productivity as they produce meanings and pleasures from cultural commodities. Their engagement varies by degree, though. Semiotic productivity is particularly central to comic-book consumption, for comic-book readers are required to bridge the gaps between panels, that is, create the narrative and its meanings across panel borders in collaboration with the writers and artists. Comic books have traditionally acknowledged the reader's active role by modeling their narration on human conversation. By highlighting the narrating instance, usually a text in the panel's left upper corner distinguished from the plot itself through framing as well as coloring, they cast the reader as the narrator's conversational partner – an active role that mirrors the high degree of semiotic productivity required from the comic-book reader. The narrator routinely addresses readers directly at the story's beginning with words such as “You will fall in love with Wonder Woman all over again in this episode” (*Sensation Comics* #28, 1944) or “What's this? ...Come along and we'll find out... shhhhh...” (*All Star Comics* #33, Johnny Thunder section, 1947), creating a sense of intimacy and complicity while attempting to stir up excitement. During the story, readers are frequently “escorted” by the narrator from one page to another as they are urged to “keep reading” (*All Star Comics* #12, Hawkman section, 1942) or to “turn the page” (*Superman* #22, “Meet the Squiffles!,” 1943), occasionally even explicitly addressed as the narrator's “friend” (*Superman* #24, “America's Secret Weapon!,” 1943) – a mode of address intended to overcome the inherent anonymity of mass communication. Whenever an aspect of the story might be difficult for the reader to follow or understand, the narrator reinforces the notion of complicity by explaining this story element to the reader.

Beyond casting the reader as the narrator's conversational partner and accomplice, however, traditional comic-book stories do not foreground the semiotic productivity required by the medium. Targeted primarily at preadolescent and young adolescent readers whose reading pleasures tend to be based on emotional involvement, they were required to cast an illusionary spell. Too great an awareness in the reader of his or her active role in creating the narrative would have undermined this illusionary spell.^{xiii} Enunciative productivity, in contrast, has from the start been openly promoted by many comic books, for the playful or oral circulation of meanings that is never put on record tends to be an essential source of pleasure for young readers. Fan clubs such as "Supermen of America," "Junior Justice Society," or "Boy Commandos" – devoted respectively to Superman, the Justice Society of America, and the Batman and Robin – were not only advertised separately but occasionally also integrated into plots. In *All Star Comics* #16 (1943), members of the "Junior Justice Society, of whom there are now thousands," actively help their heroes, drawing flattering remarks from both Dr. Fate (Justice Society section: "Those boys and girls will be a big help") and Dr. Midnite ("He's a member of the Junior Justice Society! He's a swell kid!!").

Whether textual agencies reflected upon them or not, semiotic and enunciative productivity had always been essential aspects of comic-book consumption. EC's innovation was to attempt to inspire its readers to go beyond these basic forms of fan productivity, and start engaging in the kind of *textual* productivity required for the national fan community to evolve. Though the history of textual fan productivity devoted exclusively to comic books can be traced back to the fanzine *The Comic Collector's News* that was launched in 1947, textual productivity became more widespread among comic-book consumers only in reaction to EC's "New Trend" line, which led to the publication of a multitude of EC fanzines between 1953 and 1955.

The primary method by which EC encouraged its fans to produce and participate in the creation of stories was its letter columns. In the final panel of most EC stories, readers were invited to take part in the “family’s” decision-making by mailing in comments: “We love to hear from you! You’re our bread and butter! We want to please YOU!” (SSS #1, 1952). Readers were not only understood to be equipped with the discursive competencies to make meanings, but also encouraged to participate in the production process. Promoting the notion of a semiotic democracy, senders were assured that “EACH of [their] letters has been carefully read, and the criticisms as well as compliments swallowed, digested, and in most cases acted upon” (TFC #30, 1952). A selection of letters was published in the subsequent issue’s letter column, and occasionally a letter was even explicitly referred to in a story or credited with influencing the content of a series (TFT #22, “Combat Correspondence,” 1951; TFC #32, “Tain’t the Meat... It’s the Humanity!,” 1952; TFC #39, “The Sleeping Beauty,” 1953/54).

One could understand the introduction of letter columns as a straightforward request for the decoder to provide free feedback on market preferences, and to support the encoder’s efforts to communicate by transmitting his or her reaction to the message back to the encoder. Yet being asked by a publisher for a personal opinion meant much more to young readers in the early 1950s – it meant an opportunity to have their voices heard in a cultural landscape that was locking them out, to exert a certain amount of influence on a popular market that was run by and, at the time, largely for white middle- or upper-class adults. There was a political dimension to this influence. The reflexivity and social criticism of the EC titles invited the reader to conclude that the cultural and even the social and political reality of the time was merely a human creation, just like the stories published by EC. Also like the stories published by EC, therefore, this reality could be influenced and changed by

the reader. Active, participatory readership took on the meaning of cultural, social, and political protest.

To be sure, readers' letter columns were not new to the popular market when EC started printing them in the early 1950s. Encouraging reviews of fiction as well as communication between readers, a letter column called "Discussions" became a regular feature of the science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories* as early as 1927. Other pulp magazines such as *Phantom Detective* followed suit during the 1930s. It is speculated that the comic-book medium started experimenting with the letter page in 1940 (Overstreet: 754), and in 1945 a column titled "What's on Your Mind?" became a regular feature of the popular series *Crime Does Not Pay*. The selection of letters that made it to the printed page, however, was not designed to cast readers as members of a creative community, but merely to pacify critics by promoting the claim that the series, rather than being a source of delinquency as critics claimed, actually played a crucial role in crime prevention. Almost all letters published in the crime title report cases in which readers have been converted to "the straight and narrow" by the stories' allegedly irresistible morale that crime does not pay, and their authenticity appears questionable to say the least. One letter reads:

"I have a girlfriend who thought a life of crime would be profitable and exciting. One day she read a copy of *Crime Does Not Pay* and now she tells me that a life of crime is usually a short one and you can't win against the law. Please, for her sake and others, don't ever stop publishing your wonderful, educational magazine."

Another letter states:

"I recently was released from the State Penitentiary. While I was there I had plenty of time to think of a 'job' to pull when I got out. While I was

waiting for the day of the holdup, I read your magazine *Crime Does Not Pay*. I decided to play it straight. The others called me yellow but when they read your book, they agreed with me and we called the whole thing off. From now on it's the straight and narrow for me" (quoted in Benton 1993a: 29).

It was not until the EC letter columns that a comic-book publisher cast readers as active participants in the creative process, perhaps because young people's demand for a say in cultural matters was higher than ever before in the early 1950s. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, this strategy would be successfully adopted by most other comic-book publishers, most prominently by DC and Marvel.

Another factor contributing to the popular success of comic-book letter columns is that the sense of fellowship they promote between consumers and producers is supported by the very language of the comic-book medium. Devoid of movement and sound, the communication devices employed by comics require the reader to make sense of clues such as layout or lettering style in order to grasp implied emotional nuances, time, and space; they require the reader to *participate* in the acting out of a plot; they require the reader to *interact* and *cooperate* with the creator. The communication process initiated by comics is ultimately a linear one, to be sure, and even the feedback loop of the letter column cannot transform it into a circular or dynamic one, but the language of comics nevertheless ensures that the consumers' sense of a relationship to the creators is stronger than in most other popular media.

In the case of EC, as we have seen, this relationship was promoted as a "familial" one. Membership in the EC family entailed both a welcoming environment and an implied duty to purchase and treasure each and every issue of the entire publishing line. The GhouLunatics would welcome readers with phrases like "Ah, we meet again, dear reader!"

(VOH #12, "Portrait in Wax!", 1950), "Heh, heh! Welcome back, fiends!" (TFC #35, "By the Fright of the Silvery Moon," 1953) or "Well... you readers must have stout hearts to continue coming back for more of my gruesome tales" (VOH #16, "Werewolf Concerto," 1950/51), implying long-term dedication to the series. The editors would address customers as "faithful readers" (VOH #21, "Vault-Keeper's Corner," 1951), "collectors" (VOH #17, 18, "Vault-Keeper's Corner," 1951; TFC #24, "Crypt Keeper's Corner," 1951) and "fans" (TFC #38, "Tight Grip," 1953). Readers were thanked for their "continued loyal support" and for their "enthusiastic backing" (VOH #21: "Vault-Keeper's Corner," 1951). Subscriptions were offered to "collectors that don't want to chance missing any more issues" (VOH #18, "Vault-Keeper's Corner," 1951), and certain issues were specifically talked up as "hot" (VOH #24, "The Vault-Keeper's Corner," 1952) or as "collectors' items" (TFC #33, "Lower Berth!," 1952/53; TFC #34, "Mirror, Mirror," 1952). A "collector's E.C. checklist" containing all issues ever published under the "New Trend" imprint was provided, and letters from readers desperately looking for back issues or announcing the foundation of fan clubs were published. The "best" members of the EC family, in brief, were implicitly defined as those customers dedicated enough to purchase and support the entire line.

In 1952, EC announced the formation of "The National E.C. Fan-Addict Club." Full-page advertisements for the fan club that ran in all titles cast EC fans as decaying zombies or sinister vampires inhabiting remote graveyards and secluded castles. Since club membership was certainly not intended to signal a conscience-stricken confession of guilt or even an attempt to jointly overcome the burden of addiction, the exaggerated portrayal of EC fandom could only be interpreted as a rebellious refusal to subscribe to the cultural establishment's denigration of comic-book consumption, as a rejection of the more and more loudly voiced allegations that comic-book consumption is unhealthy, addictive, and

even a source of delinquency. The Vault-Keeper put it this way: “If you’re addicted to E.C. mags... if you’re a real gone fan... then you ought to join the EC Fan-Addict Club!” (VOH #24, “...Only Sin Deep,” 1952). As readers were encouraged to laugh at the stigmatization of comic-book consumption and to impudently celebrate their popular pleasures, they were implicitly urged to challenge the cultural status quo – and, in the process, spend as much money on EC comics as possible.

By March 1954, the EC Fan-Addict Club had 17,700 members. Apart from sending out pins and ID cards to all club members, EC encouraged the formation of local chapters while fostering a sense of connection between them:

“Any group of five or more prospective members may join as an authorized chapter of the national organization. Each such chapter will be assigned a charter number. The name and address of the elected president of each authorized chapter will be made available to all members, so that those who are not already a member of a chapter will be able to join the one nearest them if they wish to” (quoted in Diehl: 145).

Moreover, this passing along of addresses provided with a list of potential customers those who felt compelled to engage in textual fan productivity going beyond the scope of letter columns. A multitude of EC fanzines were launched from 1953 on, carrying titles such as *EC Fan Bulletin*, *EC Fan Journal*, *EC Slime Sheet*, *EC Scoop*, *EC World Press*, *Potrzebie*, *Good Lord!*, *Spoof*, *Fanfare*, *Concept*, and *Hooah!*.

By definition, a fan text is not primarily produced for profit. It does not enhance the socio-economic status of its author, but is produced to fill some of the gaps left by dominant culture. As a result, textual fan productivity is typical of the socially and culturally deprived,

as well as of people who, for whatever reason, wish to consciously differentiate themselves from dominant tastes and values. Not surprisingly, then, textual fan productivity was particularly attractive to the socially and culturally deprived young people of the early 1950s who wished to differentiate themselves from the culture of complacency they found themselves surrounded with, a culture they perceived as hypocritical and oppressive. Unable to have their own voices heard in the conservative, adult-controlled political and cultural environment of their time, they gave authority to a popular product of their choice, writing to and about the politically and culturally deviant comic books published by EC. Some of them would further develop the alternative cultural space they had contested as EC fans by creating underground comix in the 1960s and 70s, most notably Jay Lynch and Robert Crumb. The fact that the EC comics of the early 1950s were not only commercially successful in their own right but even managed to inspire textual fan productivity, then, was an indicator of growing dissatisfaction with the status quo, especially among the young – and consequently a cause for increasing concern among middle- and upper-class adults.

ⁱ For this chapter, the following comic-book reprint anthologies were used: Benson, J. (ed.) 1982a-e, 1985a-e; Benson, J. and Boatner, E. B. (notes) 1980a-d; Cochran, R. (annotations) 1979a-e; Cochran, R. (publ.) 2006a-b, 2007a-b; Cole, J. 1998, 2000; Finger, B. et al. 1999; Fox, G. et al. 1991, 1997, 1998, 2001a; Kane 1990; Kane, B. et al. 1995; Kitchen, D. et al. (eds) 2011; Kurtzman, H. et al. 2002, 2007; Marston, W. M. and Peter, H. G. 2000, 2002, 2003; Meglin, N. and Ficarra, J. (eds) 2002; Siegel, J. and Shuster, J. 1989; Siegel, J. et al. 2000, 2003, 2005.

ⁱⁱ It took EC about one year to establish this subversive tone in its horror titles. Depicting a teacher as fatally mistaken, the story “Horror in the School Room,” published in the pages of *The Haunt of Fear* #7 (1951), marked an essential step toward an increasingly critical portrayal of the status quo.

ⁱⁱⁱ For further examples of stories casting the family as a source of aggression or murder, see: SSS #9, “The October Game,” 1953; SSS #10, “The Sacrifice,” 1953; SSS #11, “...Three’s a Crowd,” 1953.

^{iv} Publishers viewing their product as more than a mere source of capital are very much the exception in a capitalist society at any time, and in the post-war period a business philosophy that considered less popular titles worth funding with the earnings from more profitable ones was unheard of in the comic-book industry.

^v According to Jim Trombetta, the horror genre at its peak in the early 1950s represented about twenty-five percent of the comic-book industry's overall output (31).

^{vi} As the basic conventions of the superhero genre have already been established by the early 1940s, they are increasingly treated as the norm characters must measure themselves against. In "Book of Enchantment" of *Batman* #5 (1941), for example, a scientist feels the need to distinguish himself from "those crackpot, mad scientists one reads about in... comic books," implicitly acknowledging the establishment of the type of the generic comic-book villain and celebrating its popularity.

^{vii} Already professionally established as a successful psychologist when creating Wonder Woman, William Moulton Marston was very much the exception among the comic-book writers of the Golden Age. Motivated by an eagerness to challenge the superhero genre's inherent sexism rather than by economic necessities, his relationship to the medium differed fundamentally from that of his colleagues. In Marston's unique case, the author's elevated social and professional status was well-suited to lending an aura of respectability to the title and its feminist ambitions. The author's photograph was thus printed on the inside cover of *Wonder Woman* #2 (1942) alongside an article referring to him as the "well known psychologist and inventor of the lie detector." "Etta Candy and Her Holliday Girls" of *Wonder Woman* #5 (1943) even features fictionalized versions of the title's creators, casting caricatures of writer William Moulton Marston and penciller Harry G. Peter as newspaper reporters determined to get the latest scoop on Wonder Woman: "The girls try to exclude reporters – but with the intrepid spirit of true newspaper men, your writer and artist crash the party as waiters."

Another Golden Age creator making an appearance in one of his own comics is Jack Cole. In *Police Comics* #20 (1943), fictional hero Plastic Man has a "silly dream" of his real-life creator as an unbearably vain and braggy, stuttering cartoonist forced to toil under his greedy and cruel publisher's thumb. Hard-pressed for money, the fictionalized version of Cole looks to spice up his "Plastic Man" story with some exploitative violence: "O boy! If one of y-y-you g-gets k-k-k-killed, t-this might be a g-good story after all!" Undermining the narrative's illusionary spell, this appearance of a fictionalized Cole – apart from functioning as comedy – is designed to awaken the reader's critical intelligence, that is, to promote critical reflection on the generic exploitation of physical violence as well as on the principles of the story's own production.

Finally, as we have seen in Chapter 4.6, "The Spirit" features various appearances of fictionalized versions of Will Eisner and even of his war-time "ghost writers." Critical distance from genre conventions as well as from the mechanisms of the comic-book industry, it has been argued in Chapters 4.4 and 4.6, generally characterizes the narratives of both "Plastic Man" and "The Spirit." It is absent, however, from more conventional Golden Age fare.

^{viii} In order to give an impression of the rapid growth of the youth market during the mid-1950s, it is helpful to note some key events. Selling about two million copies, "(We're Gonna) Rock Around the Clock" by Bill Haley & His Comets would become the first rock 'n' roll record to top the *Billboard* charts in 1955. In the same year, Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* would attract a wide audience with a story featuring teenagers as

its main characters and told, arguably for the first time in the history of film, from their point of view. In 1956, Elvis Presley would have his commercial breakthrough.

^{ix} After an abortive attempt to unionize in 1946, comic-book creators made a second attempt in 1951 which temporarily led to the formation of the Society of Comic Book Illustrators, but this ultimately proved unable to gain a foothold in the industry as well.

^x Russ Cochran points out that

“artists who worked at EC put in tiny details, little minute scratches of the pen or brush, into their drawings that they knew would not show up with cheap comic book reproduction. I couldn’t figure out why these guys went to all the trouble to do that, knowing it wouldn’t reproduce, until I realized that they were doing it for each other. There was a mutual admiration society among the artists at EC. They were always trying to impress one another. It was a labor of love” (quoted in Diehl: 55).

^{xi} In contrast to EC’s positive depiction of its own comic-book production, movies such as *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) or *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954) during the first half of the 1950s portrayed the filmmaking process and the anatomy of studio relationships in a more negative light than ever before. While the EC comics cast Gaines as a benign and generous father figure, *The Bad and the Beautiful* first introduces the ruthless, egotistical, tyrannical, disloyal, yet brilliantly successful Hollywood producer to the screen. While the EC comics promote themselves as youth culture products of joyful and equitable collaboration, *The Bad and the Beautiful* constructs film as a “beautiful” product that is necessarily created by the “bad,” an omnipotent auteur whose presence dwarfs directors, actors, and writers alike. Christopher Ames suggests that *The Bad and the Beautiful* evokes “Hollywood as an embodiment of the force that grants success yet takes away happiness,” as a contradictory dream factory “that is criticized for its heartlessness while it is celebrated as the source of glamour, a medium for creativity, and, ultimately, a fount of great movies” (163). The production of comic books, however, has never been the source of glamour. As we have seen in Chapter 2, it has traditionally been a largely anonymous affair, neither socially nor institutionally legitimated.

^{xii} According to John Fiske,

“the dominant habitus uses information about the artist to enhance or enrich the appreciation of the work, whereas in the popular habitus such knowledge increases the power of the fan to ‘see through’ to the production process normally hidden by the text and thus inaccessible to the non-fan... The popular habitus makes such knowledge functional and potentially empowering in the everyday life of the fan” (1992b: 43).

Clearly, the EC comic books promote the reading position of the popular habitus.

^{xiii} Aimed at older readers than the typical comic book from the 1940s, the Plastic Man stories represent an exception to the rule. As they promote the more critical and analytical reading position of older readers, a reading position that can benefit from awareness of semiotic activity, they rely to a lesser degree on emotional

involvement and identification. Two Plastic Man stories explicitly enlist the reader's active collaboration, a narrative device frequently employed by self-conscious novelists. One casts the reader as the hero's competitor: "Lock your doors! Draw the shades! And grab a pencil, dear reader! ...This is a contest between you and Plastic Man! Can you solve the case before he does?" The reader is asked to draw the results of his or her own "detective work" into a panel that has been left blank for this purpose, and thus to function literally as the text's co-author: "How about it, folks? Who do you think is guilty? Write your deductions below and check up later..." (*Police Comics* #17, 1943). Similarly, the story "The Game of Death" is explicitly described by the narrator as an indeterminate scheme that relies on the reader's own contributions to be complete: "Now... before we go any further, get a pencil and scan the crowd above... for the murderer is among them! Can you pick him – or her – out?" (*Plastic Man* #1, 1943). As the considerable amount of semiotic autonomy that the comic-book medium generally grants to the reader is given concrete shape, the reader is reminded of his or her own active role in creating the narrative.

Chapter 7ⁱ

The Comics Code: Implementation and Effects

Despite strong economic growth,ⁱⁱ the 1950s in the United States were a time of great tension and concern about family hierarchies as well as class and racial politics. Long-term struggles for civil, women's, and youth rights came to the fore. In 1954, the Supreme Court struck down the "separate but equal" doctrine for the field of public education, ruling that separate facilities by their very nature could not be considered equal, and mandating that schools be integrated with "all deliberate speed." High school consequently became a more heterogeneous institution that increasingly transcended the barriers of race and class. The percentage of African-American students with a high school degree doubled from the early 1940s to the late 1950s, allowing for a new level of inter-ethnic exchange. By 1960, over ninety percent of all high-school-aged Americans were attending school.

Removed from parental control for several hours per day, teenagers further developed a peer identity many adults were uncomfortable with. Even after school, more and more teens and preteens found themselves less closely supervised than in the past, for growing numbers of young mothers were joining the workforce. By the mid-1950s, about fifty percent of all high-school students made use of their new-found freedom by taking on part-time employment for some part of the year, emerging as increasingly independent consumers and thus assuming a role that had previously been the exclusive privilege of adults (Gilbert: 18-20; Cassity and Levaren: 95). From the mid-1950s on, American adolescents were rapidly gaining recognition as a distinct new consumer group, giving rise to an unparalleled expansion of the youth market. As adolescent tastes started to be courted by the popular media, the cultural visibility of young people was dramatically increased.

Gradual shifts in youth behavior that had been set in motion with the rise in high-school enrollment starting around the turn of the century and increasing during the Great Depression consequently took the deceptive shape of a sudden revolution.

The developments outlined above were destined to drastically transform American society, yet early cultural indicators of this transformation met with bitter opposition at a time when the anxieties of the Cold War translated into broad popular support for traditional power structures and values. Benefiting from growing anti-communist sentiments in the American population, Republican candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower won a landslide victory in the 1952 presidential elections that showcased the dramatically weakened position of the political left. Vigilance against domestic communism became a national priority. The House Committee on Un-American Activities, the Subcommittee on Investigations of the Senate Committee on Government Operations, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation imposed political standards upon art, corrupting the sphere of self-expression that the First Amendment had been designed to protect.

Such trampling of democratic and constitutional rights was possible because mainstream opinion had become preoccupied with national security risks.ⁱⁱⁱ Political demagogues had repeatedly warned the population of sinister and strategic communist infiltration of the United States; Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin called this

“a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf all previous such venture in the history of man. A conspiracy of infamy so black that, when it is finally exposed, its principals shall be forever deserving of the maledictions of all honest men” (quoted in Whitfield: 37).

Signs of what were assumed to be communist threats were spotted everywhere, particularly in the field of popular culture. Entertainment industry blacklists were instituted, barring

artists from work on the basis of alleged membership in, or sympathy for, the American Communist Party, or simply because they refused to assist the investigations. Liberal and humanitarian impulses such as the commitment to racial justice became suspect and were investigated by government agencies. The term “democracy” at the height of the Cold War no longer stood for the subordinate’s right to challenge the status quo, but came to represent the status quo itself, assuming the meaning of a bastion against communism which needed to be fortified and hardened in order to be effective. As public opinion at times of national crisis tends to favorably connote drastic measures in support of the status quo with patriotism, the Red Scare made it possible and “patriotic” to employ reactionary methods against every sign of social change. It is this very mechanism that can be identified as the core of the anti-communist crusade.

Young people at any time represent the future and accordingly serve as a barometer of social change. In the early 1950s, the young were the harbingers of a rapidly transforming society marked by eroding class and racial boundaries as well as by altered family and gender hierarchies. Adult middle-and upper-class anxieties about the future therefore translated into anxieties about the young. These anxieties did not find expression in the appropriation of tax dollars to support neglected and delinquent youth, but rather in a desperate attempt to “discipline” the family and society as a whole by patronizing and punishing the young.

High birth rates since the end of World War II further contributed to adult concerns, as it became clear that the children and infants of the 1950s belonged to a generation that, due to its sheer size, was destined to leave its mark on history – a generation that has become known as that of the “post-war baby boomers.” An increasing number of adults felt that drastic measures needed to be taken to keep this powerful generation in check, and that to prevent social turmoil, traditional values and beliefs needed to be hammered into the minds

of baby boomers while they were still young and impressionable. At stake was nothing less than long-standing privileges based on the hierarchies of class, gender, race, and age.

In an attempt to promote and justify the taking of drastic measures, the power bloc did all it could to discredit the cultures and lifestyles of the young. In 1953, for example, FBI director John Edgar Hoover sent out the following message to all law enforcement officials:

“The first wave in this flood tide of new citizens born between 1940 and 1950 has just this year reached the ‘teen age,’ the period in which some of them will inevitably incline toward juvenile delinquency and, later, a full-fledged criminal career.”

Failure to recognize this “onerous development,” Hoover concluded, would amount to a “social crime” (quoted in Gilbert: 72). While birth rates had – along with the economy – started to recover in the early 1940s, they had actually declined during the final two years of World War II, and it was not until the end of the war that birth rates increased significantly. Hoover’s message, like many others he delivered to the public throughout the 1950s, was not designed to educate but to stir up the kind of moral panic that would allow for the fortification of established power structures.

Still overwhelmingly targeted at an adult audience during the first half of the decade, the popular media provided further apparent justification for adult repression of the young and their culture. Films and paperback novels, for example, were flooded with depictions of violent teenage thugs rampaging through the streets while senselessly trampling on the traditional social order, imagery that functioned as a shocking index of social decline. Relating these depictions to historical facts is not an easy task. Closer inspection of what was at the time hyped to be a juvenile crime wave has led historian James Gilbert to conclude that the phenomenon was largely a statistical one brought about by an increase in attention

paid to juvenile behavior, by a shift in the behavior of law enforcement agencies as a result of political and public pressures, and by the emergence of a distinct youth culture that disturbed adults and was frequently (and often intentionally) confused with criminal activity (66-71).

The disparity between popular imagery and historical fact suggests that the term “juvenile delinquency,” much like the term “communism,” contained a large measure of subsurface meaning during the 1950s.^{iv} By denigrating representatives of social change on the one hand, and advocates of change on the other, the two terms functioned to give the prosaic and callous objective of protecting the status quo a much more altruistic and benevolent appearance. Both the notion of “fighting juvenile delinquency” and that of “anti-communism” served to promote discourses of morality, patriotism, and legality – the one in order to displace the discourse of age-based social power, the other to displace that of class-based social power. Though they were overshadowed by moral panic and remained largely unvoiced at the time, these power discourses were at the very heart of the post-war period’s social tensions.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, comic books bore the imprint of an uncertain future more clearly than any other form of popular entertainment. Even though the majority of their readers were by now adults over twenty years of age, comic books continued to represent the only medium embraced nearly unanimously by the young, and the most popular product of the emerging youth market before the mainstream breakthrough of rock ‘n’ roll. It comes as no surprise, then, that comic books became a main target for those alarmed by the possibility of losing their social privileges, and the crusade against comics from the late 1940s on was accordingly led by middle-class moralists.

One of the earliest so-called “community decency crusades”^v to target comic books and find a national audience was launched in 1948 by a civic group that called itself the Committee on Evaluation of Comic Books in Cincinnati. It consisted of mothers, educators, members of the Parent Teacher Association, juvenile court workers, librarians, clergymen, and representatives of the business community. The presence of the following characteristics, among others, would result in a comic book being evaluated as “objectionable” or “very objectionable”: the use of language of the “underworld”; any depiction of “indecently” dressed figures; any sexual implications; any depiction of drug addiction or excessive alcohol consumption; any depiction of bleeding or dead bodies; any belittling of traditional American institutions; expression of sympathy with criminals; glamorization or detailed portrayal of criminal activity; any portrayal of racist or classist prejudice (Nyberg: 23-30).

Given these standards, it is obvious that only the most simplistic comic books aimed at preteens could qualify to be rated as “some objection” or “no objection.” Even though the underlying discourses of social and cultural power are clearly evident, this early public attempt to control the phenomenon of comic books tries to shift the terms of debate to the widely accepted discourses of aesthetics, morality, health, legality, and patriotism. Yet the text of the rating system not only displaces its own power discourses, it also explicitly condemns their exposure on the pages of comic books by decrying, completely irrespective of the narrative context, any hints at the mere existence of social discords regarding class or race.

On 1 July 1948, the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers (ACMP) reacted to growing public concern by announcing the adoption of a code designed primarily to tone down the violent and the subversive aspects of comic books, and thus to detach the medium from the wider controversy surrounding youth culture. The code functioned in the terms of two discourses: the discourse of violence, which would come to dominate the public discussion,

and the discourse of social power, which would remain largely unvoiced but was fundamental to adult fears nonetheless. Enforcing this code proved problematic, though, as it was initially endorsed by only about one-third of all comic-book publishers; all but three of these would break ranks with it by 1954.

Still in 1948, the *Library Journal* expressed concern that comic books “sold in greater numbers annually than books,” calling on teachers and parents to push back the comic-book menace and restore the dominance of “good books.” By November, the National Council of Parents and Teachers formed a committee to “help wipe out” comic books (quoted in Lopes: 43, 45). The press even reported several public burnings of piled-up comic books in school yards, supervised by teachers and executed by students seeking their approval. Government officials were urged by church and civic groups across the country to join the cause. Local retailers were asked to remove “objectionable” comic books from their shelves, threatened with boycotts, and offered certificates for compliance. Most retailers did not comply, though, preferring their young customers’ cash.

Confronted with the dilemma that the status quo is obviously open to contestation and that popular pleasure cannot be openly suppressed in the name of age or class, comic-book opponents increasingly fell back on the strategy of turning the object of their attacks into a scapegoat for problems actually rooted in more complex social and economic issues, most notably juvenile delinquency. Will Eisner delivered a sarcastic response to this strategy as early as 1947 with a series of stories called “The Spirit’s Favorite Fairy Tales for Juvenile Delinquents,” updated versions of classic fairy tales that turn out to be not quite as “wholesome” as the originals. Hansel and Gretel, for example, are cast as two underprivileged, slang-talking, street-smart, and independent kids more than capable of defending themselves against adult intrigue. Adult critics of the medium, it is implied, should get used to the fact that the preadolescents of the post-war period are more

confident and independent than those of the past. Good for them, the plot suggests. The bitingly ironic introduction reads:

“This is a public service feature and is based upon the requests of public-minded citizens who feel that juvenile crime is largely a result of deficiency in the wholesome literature we used to enjoy. The author (who believes ‘tis better late than never) is glad to cooperate. He hopes to ‘reach’ those strayed little lambs and perhaps fill a gap in their twisted lives.

This adaptation has the approval of the Waterfront Protective A.C. and Social Club and is heartily indorsed by its president, Jake the Goon, who has just signed a long-term contract with the state” (13 July 1947).

Yet the inability of the ACMP to find industry-wide support for its code strengthened the position of comic-book opponents, who successfully pressed state and federal legislators to investigate the industry in spite of the Supreme Court’s 1948 ruling that the management of violent content in the media is a matter of self-regulation. The first systematic study of comic books by a legislative body, the New York State Joint Legislative Committee to Study the Publication of Comics, was initiated on 29 March 1949. Based on the false assumption that preadolescents and adolescents made up the crime and horror comics’ primary audience, the results of the committee’s yearlong investigation confirmed the critics’ central allegations that the acts of violence depicted in comics interfered with the “normal” and “ethical” development of children and were “a contributing factor leading to juvenile delinquency” (*Report* [1951] quoted in Nyberg: 45).

By explicitly linking comic books to the growing anxieties about juvenile delinquency, the report cast doubt on the legality of youth culture as a whole, that is, on the legitimacy of

young people's claim to a realm of expression and consumption beyond parental control. Though the fundamental adult concern was still social and cultural control of the young, as it had been from the start, the discourses dominating the public discussion were now shifting from those of aesthetics and morality to the less challengeable ones of legality and health, raising the stakes considerably. Presenting as role models the self-regulatory codes other popular media such as film, radio, television, and magazines had already accepted, the committee urged comic-book publishers to adopt their own code. However, the comic-book industry took no further action in response.

The bluster surrounding juvenile delinquency was approaching its peak in 1953, when the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency formed to undertake major hearings into the subject. The publication of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* in April 1954, and the reviews it received in almost every North American newspaper, ensured that the spotlight was once again on comic books. The book lent an aura of scientific proof to claims that the consumption of comic books increased the chances of delinquent behavior and generally impeded any child's "healthy" development. Designed to mobilize public support for a ban on the sale of all comic books to children under the age of fifteen, it polemically sensationalized and exploited the results of the author's own case studies of comic books and children. Assuming the elitist position that comic books "have no artistic justification" (174), Wertham portrayed the comic-book medium as little more than the culture industry's ruthless attempt to seduce innocent children by means of "violence; sadism and cruelty" (15). Correspondingly, he narrowed the scope of his audience analysis to an accumulation of undocumented anecdotes that came to "substantiate" various exclusively negative effects of comic-book consumption. Comic books are argued, for example, to "do harm in the sphere of taste, esthetics, ethics and human relations"; to "create sex fears of all kinds" (185) and promote "sexually abnormal ideas" (118); even to

“do their share in laying the psychological groundwork” for “childhood prostitution” (186).

One of the book’s more developed allegations is the claim that “the comic-book format is an invitation to illiteracy” (118) or, in more polemic terms, that “comic books are death on reading” (121). According to Wertham, they represent “a causal and reinforcing factor in children’s reading disorders” (130) which “have increased and will continue to increase with the rise of the comic book” (128). The comic books’ poor paper quality is suggested to cause “eyestrain” (139); their spelling is criticized as “often faulty” and their writing as “extremely poor in style and language,” consisting of “many words that are not words at all” (144). Moreover, the regular comic-book reader “acquires the habit of reading irregular bits of printing here and there in balloons instead of complete lines from left to right,” a habit that is argued to “do specific harm” to “the acquisition of fluent left-to-right eye movements, which is so indispensable for good reading” (127). Even more harm is done, according to Wertham, by “the discrepancy between the easy appeal of the pictures and the difficulty of reading the text” that marks the typical comic book, as this discrepancy encourages “picture reading,” that is, the “gazing at the successive pictures of the comic book with a minimal reading of printed letters” (139). Wertham decries that “in comics all the emphasis is on the visual image and not on the proper word” (125), and that therefore all comic-book readers, unable to resist the seductive power of the image, inevitably become “picture readers.”

Elitist fears of accessible popular images that take on narrative function once again find expression in an attempt to denigrate and scandalize their effects by casting them as the inferior yet dangerous Other. Firmly rooted in the Western myth of the image as “natural” sign, Wertham casts the reading of the word and that of the image as fundamentally opposed realms: “I have found that comic-book reading and reading good books for

pleasure are for all purposes opposites” (142). In the tradition of the Western school of thought, the reading of the word that is required by “good books” is articulated with civilization: “The dawn of civilization was marked by the invention of writing. Reading, therefore, is not only one of the cornerstones of civilized life, it is also one of the main foundations of a child’s adjustment to it” (121). Also in the tradition of the Western school of thought, the word (and thus civilization) is connoted with masculinity when Wertham argues that “comic books adapted from classical literature... emasculate the classics” (36). “Picture reading,” on the other hand, is not only cast as an activity located outside the spheres of civilization and masculinity but as a threat to these spheres and, by extension, to the healthy development of the child:

“This kind of picture reading is not actually a form of reading, nor is it a pre-stage of real reading. It is an evasion of reading and almost its opposite. Habitual picture readers are severely handicapped in the task of becoming readers of books later, for the habit of picture reading interferes with acquisition of well-developed reading habits” (140).

The effect of comic books is accordingly described as not only non-educational but “anti-educational... in the larger sense.” Wertham explains: “For a child, education is not merely a question of learning, but is part of mental health.” Comic books thus not only interfere with education “in the narrower sense,” but “with his healthful mental growth” (89). As “unhealthful mental growth” can find expression in delinquent behavior, this argument allows Wertham to link the very grammar of the comic-book medium to the widespread fears of juvenile delinquency. In this context, Wertham points out that “a disproportionate number of poor or non-readers become delinquent, and a disproportionate number of delinquents have pronounced reading disorders” (136).

While Wertham portrays all comic books as a threat to the “healthful mental growth” of a child, he argues that “crime comics” – a term he uses to describe not only comic books of the crime genre but also jungle, western, horror and superhero comics – in particular “stimulate unwholesome fantasies” (118) and undermine the reader’s “sense of decency” (100). According to Wertham, they “give children a feeling of justification for violence and sadism, frequently in fantasy and sometimes in acts” (104). Arguing that “brutality in fantasy creates brutality in fact” (109), Wertham concludes that “there is a significant correlation between crime-comics reading and the more serious forms of juvenile delinquency” (164). He admits that “crime comics are certainly not the only factor, nor in many cases are they even the most important one” contributing to juvenile delinquency, but nevertheless insists that “in many cases, in conjunction with other factors, they are the chief one” (166).

As obvious as the flaws of Wertham’s scientific methodology may appear in retrospect, they went largely unnoticed at a time when there was still a widespread belief in the objectivity of so-called expert observations and the reliability of mono-disciplinary empirical explanations. Much more crucial to the public perception of *Seduction of the Innocent* was that it functioned as grist to the mill of all those interested in avoiding alternative discussions about social and political causes of juvenile delinquency. Parents were among the first to embrace Wertham’s confirmation of a causal link between comic books and juvenile crime, for it absolved them from having to consider the home environment as a potential source of delinquency. Wertham himself appears to have been well aware that the success of his book relied on the degree to which it could fulfill this very function, for he concluded it with an anecdote about him lifting the burden of guilt from the sobbing mother of a juvenile delinquent:

“You have done all that you could... You are a good mother, and you’ve given this boy a good home. But the influence of a good home is frustrated if it is not supported by the other influences children are exposed to – the comic books, the crime programs and all that... So don’t worry about yourself. It’s not your fault.’ She seemed to come out from under a cloud. She thanked me and got up to go. When she was halfway through the doorway she turned slowly. ‘Doctor,’ she said in a low voice. ‘I’m sorry to take your time. But please – tell me again.’ I looked at her questioningly. ‘Tell me again,’ she said slowly and hesitantly. ‘Tell me again that it isn’t my fault.’ And I did” (396-97).

A socially committed psychiatrist and cultural critic in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, Fredric Wertham introduced liberal anxieties about an overwhelmingly powerful “culture industry” – viewed as one-sidedly serving the interests of the power bloc – to a campaign previously fueled primarily by the almost antithetical conservative impulse to defend the status quo from what were depicted as largely autonomous popular subcultures. World War II had added fears of mass manipulation to the critical discussion about popular culture, creating what may be referred to as an “unholy alliance” between the political right and the left, that is, a coalition against commercial entertainment between conservative and Marxist (or neo-Marxist) cultural critics. While the political right had always feared the subversive potential of commercial entertainment, the left was starting to view it as an oppressive apparatus serving the dominant capitalist class by fostering conformity and political apathy among mass audiences. The young appeared particularly vulnerable, for the emerging field of critical communication studies in the United States did not cast them as active consumers with the power to create meaning from their product of choice, but, in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, as easy prey for the oppressive “mass media.” Wertham’s

leftist assault on comic books accordingly strengthened the position of anti-comic-book crusaders from the other end of the political spectrum, confirming their argument that a youth culture they were unable to control, and therefore branded as lower class in origin, necessarily found expression in delinquent behavior. With critics from both ends of the political spectrum united in their rejection of commercial youth culture and their desire to denounce, devalue, and condemn it, it no longer mattered that social workers, psychologists, sociologists, and criminologists almost universally rejected any direct linkage between the media and delinquency. Nor did it matter that academic research disproved the popular assumption that reading comic books had a negative effect on the development of reading skills, academic achievement, or social competence. Wertham pressed for legislation against comic books, and he received broad support from the National Education Association and from the National Congress of Parents and Teachers.

In the spring of 1954, the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency reacted to public pressure by broadening its investigation to include an inquiry of the comic-book industry. During the hearings that were held over the course of three days in New York City, the spotlight was on two witnesses personifying the antipodes of the controversy, Fredric Wertham and William M. Gaines. On the one hand, Wertham stated that comic books, while certainly not the only cause of juvenile crime, were but beyond the shadow of a doubt “an important contributing factor in many cases of juvenile delinquency” (quoted in Nyberg: 61). On the other, Gaines insisted that “delinquency is the product of [the] real environment in which the child lives and not of the fiction he reads” (quoted in Wright: 167).

Showing no solidarity whatsoever, all other attending representatives of the comic-book industry decided to protect their own interests by conceding that certain comic books were indeed worthy of no defense – not their own, to be sure, but those published by EC and

other competitors. Henry Schultz, executive director of the ACMP, stated that “many of the comic-book publishers have failed in their duty to mothers,” that they had “debased” a medium that was once “a wonderful vital thing.” Helen Meyer, vice president of Dell Publications, replied when asked if she was in support of the elimination of horror comics (which Dell Publications did not deal in): “We certainly are. And we would love to help you do it” (quoted in Lopes: 52). Moreover, comic-strip creators Walt Kelly and Milton Caniff successfully dissociated their medium from the controversy by drawing a clear line between what Kelly called “the great danger of the magazines in question” (quoted in Beaty 2005: 160) and the supposedly harmless and even informative newspaper strips.

In the course of the hearings, the crusade against the comic-book medium as a whole was modified into one against the medium’s most ideologically subversive genres, crime and horror. It soon became clear that all topics with the potential to support Gaines’ position had been conveniently excluded from the committee’s agenda. First, the crime and horror comic books at hand were treated as isolated phenomena; their cultural, social, economic, and political environment was ignored. Second, the committee drew a curtain over the fact that the readers of crime and horror comics were predominantly young adults, not children. Third, no attempt was made to analyze the stories’ narrative trajectory. The panels chosen by Wertham were presented completely out of context, serving as mere illustrations of the preconceived thesis that crime and horror comic books promote undesirable behavioral patterns and attitudes such as brutality or racism. And finally, the boundaries of “good taste” were treated as fixed and non-negotiable. Constructing hierarchies of taste that functioned as a symbolic weapon against the subversive aesthetics of the emerging commercial youth culture, the senators and chief counsel assumed the role of agencies of the cultural status quo. The discourses of social and cultural power were at the heart of the

investigation into juvenile crime, just as they were at the heart of the decade's wider social tensions.

It is no coincidence that the committee came to focus its attention on the comic books published by EC, for these comics represented the most unapologetic and confrontational expression of youth and young adult culture at the time. EC comics, as we have seen, were deviant on multiple counts.^{vi} Not only did they directly target teenagers and young adults, but their liberal, anti-racial bias, their questioning of American institutions such as family and military, and their critical portrayal of figures of authority infringed on the social, cultural, economic, and political status quo. At a time when in the United States dissent was frequently confused with disloyalty, the popular success of the EC line indicated widespread dissatisfaction with the popular consensus. Yet as central as all of these complex power discourses were to the controversy surrounding EC,^{vii} that none of them were openly discussed by the committee. Instead, the committee chose to put the spotlight on the depictions of physical violence that marked all horror comics during the first half of the 1950s, not just those published by EC. With a growing number of publishers competing for limited newsstand display, shock value had become an important marketing tool – but also made an easy target for critics of the medium.^{viii}

Not surprisingly, then, the senators were inclined to side with Wertham's accusations, even though no empirical evidence could be provided in their support. The hearings, it can be argued, had never been intended to get to the bottom of the suggested link between comic books and juvenile delinquency, but rather to convince the public that the necessary steps were being taken to control the perceived threat of cultural and generational insubordination. As the investigations were among the first televised hearings in history, they attracted a huge audience of up to eighty-six percent of all operating television sets (Gilbert: 145), and thus gave ambitious politicians such as Senator Kefauver of Tennessee

the opportunity to distinguish themselves as passionate advocates of the adult perceptions and values that were supposedly under juvenile assault.

Unlike Wertham, however, the senators realized that the legal prohibition of the sale of all comic books to children under age fifteen was a goal that could not possibly be achieved. Instead, they adopted the strategy of denouncing and denigrating the comic-book industry and frightening the publishers into policing themselves, that is, into finally adopting a self-regulatory code modeled after the Film Production Code from 1934. The committee's interim report read:

“Within the industry, the primary responsibility for the contents of each comic book rests squarely upon the shoulders of its publisher... [T]he publishers of children's comic books... can be fully discharged only as they seek and support ways and means of insuring that the industry's product permanently measures up to its standards of morality and decency which American parents have the right to expect” (quoted in Nyberg: 83).

As can be expected, the discourses of morality and decency were promoted in order to hide the underlying ones of social and cultural power. Self-censorship was cast as a necessary safeguard meant to serve the “national interest” by protecting the moral and social welfare of children, a group falsely declared to be the sole audience of comic books and defined as vulnerable. The strategy was successful, and the Catholic publication *America* was quick to celebrate how

“the ground swell of public opinion against the crime-horror comics is mounting to a tidal wave. From dozens of places over the country... there is mounting evidence of more vocal public protest and more

vigorous police action against this type of comic book, which is more and more being indicated as an incentive to juvenile crime” (quoted in Lopes: 53).

When the comic-book controversy peaked in the summer of 1954, sales declined rapidly and several smaller publishers went under. In the course of only a few months, the number of publishers declined from forty-two to twenty-seven. On 7 September 1954, the comic-book industry reacted by officially announcing the formation of the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA), a trade association run by representatives of the industry’s largest publishers^{ix}: Archie Comics’ John Goldwater as president, DC’s Jack Liebowitz as vice-president, Marvel’s Martin Goodman as secretary, and Harvey Comics’ Leon Harvey as treasurer. Apart from EC, only two other publishers refused to join.^x Seven weeks later, the CMAA published the Comics Code. A comic book that was judged by the association to comply with the criteria of the Code would be granted a “Seal of Approval” that publishers could print on the cover; and it soon became clear that most wholesalers and retailers would not handle comic books from smaller publishers such as EC unless they carried the “Seal of Approval.”

Above all, the Comics Code insisted on an uncritical portrayal of the status quo: “Policemen, judges, government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.” The traditional family was identified as the very foundation of this status quo, and the Code accordingly came to its aid:

“Divorce shall not be treated humorously nor represented as desirable. Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at nor portrayed... Respect for parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior shall be fostered...

The treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage.”

While institutionalized power was courted by the Code, popular and fashionable signifiers of the emerging youth culture in the spheres of language and clothing, as well as all hints at sexuality, were declared to be in opposition to “good taste” and to “untouchable moral standards,” therefore, unacceptable:

“Profanity, obscenity, smut, vulgarity, or words or symbols which have acquired undesirable meanings are forbidden... Although slang and colloquialisms are acceptable, excessive use should be discouraged and wherever possible good grammar shall be employed... All characters shall be depicted in dress reasonably acceptable to society... Passion or romantic interest shall never be treated in such a way as to stimulate the lower and baser emotions” (quoted in Nyberg: 167-68).

The most severe restrictions were imposed on the genre most radically opposed to adult middle-class notions of “good taste,” the horror genre. The Comics Code demanded the elimination of “all lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations” as well as any “scenes dealing with vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism,” and even explicitly prohibited the terms “horror” and “terror” in a comic-book title. On top of all these directives, a catch-all provision empowered the reviewers to reject “all elements or techniques not specifically mentioned [in the Code], but which are contrary to the spirit and intent of the Code, and are considered violations of good taste or decency” (quoted in Nyberg: 166-68).

At its heart, the Comics Code was intended to assure concerned adults that they were still in (or, at least, had regained) control of the leisure activities of the young, and accordingly that the consumption of comic books – despite the medium’s inherently suspect grammar of

both word and image, and its supposedly crime-inducing publishing history – would henceforth serve adult interests. In response to the above-outlined anxieties of middle- and upper-class adults, the Code was designed to cast comic books as a medium that championed the status quo; a medium that imposed traditional values and beliefs on a generation of baby boomers that was rapidly becoming a cultural force and was bound to become a political one in the not too distant future; a medium that perpetuated the traditional family hierarchies that had been undermined by increasingly independent juvenile consumers as well as growing numbers of gainfully employed mothers. Significantly, as Nyberg (115) has pointed out, the structure of the Comics Code Authority office was designed to mirror that of a patriarchal family. Judge Charles F. Murphy was named the (male) “czar” or administrator of the enterprise. Under his supervision, the daily routine of enforcing the Code’s standards on the thousands of comic books in question was assigned to five female reviewers, and thus cast as an extension of the mother’s traditional responsibility to watch over the children.

The Effects of the Comics Code

The CMAA had decided to accept the critics’ false assumption that comic books were still a children’s medium, sacrificing those genres and titles that had branched out into the teen- and young adult market.^{xi} This decision made perfect sense to those major comic-book publishers of the mid-1950s that were in control of the CMAA. Preadolescent readers in 1954 represented a highly attractive target audience as a result of the still ongoing post-war baby boom. The baby boomers had not yet started reaching adolescence, and were consequently still very dependent on their parents. For the comic-book industry to reach them, it was crucial to win the approval of these parents. In fact, the largest comic-book publishers of the mid-1950s had tried to do just that long before the implementation of the Comics Code. DC Comics had given in to the demands of self-proclaimed upholders of

moral standards and decency by introducing an in-house Editorial Advisory Board as early as 1941, and the Comics Code thus had little impact on its already bland and conservative humor, romance, western, and superhero titles. Marvel was publishing a wide range of genres in the mid-1950s, most of which (romance, western, war, humor, funny animal, sports, and Bible stories) were compatible with Code requirements. Dell focused on licensed child-oriented material that had been preapproved by the tightly censored film and television industries, adapting animated characters from Walt Disney Productions and Warner Bros., along with various television programs such as *The Yogi Bear Show*, *Howdy Doody*, and *The Lone Ranger*. In addition, much like DC, the publisher had established its own editorial code in the early 1940s. The backbone of Archie Comics was still the teen genre and its by now uncontroversial world of milkshakes and puppy love. Harvey Comics, like Dell, was best known for its child-oriented comedy characters, most notably Caspar the Friendly Ghost, Little Dot, and Little Audrey.

In an article titled “How They’re Cleaning up the Comic Books” that was published in the March 1955 edition of *Better Homes and Gardens* and targeted at the baby boomers’ parents, DC editor Mort Weisinger claimed that

“comic-book houses are on the hot seat today as a result of conscienceless editing by a minority of unethical publishers within their ranks...[I]t is because of the past activities of the lunatic fringe that the entire industry has been smeared... Released to civic groups, law-enforcement agencies, and church groups, the code drew unprecedented acclaim” (quoted in Lopes: 55).

Comic-book publishers whose products had dared challenge the boundaries of “good taste” and criticize the status quo were denounced as “conscienceless” and “unethical,” as the

industry's "lunatic fringe" that deserved to be "cleaned up" and wiped out. By the time Weisinger's article was published, the horror and crime comics had disappeared from the stands, along with almost all the other sociocritical titles published by EC. By implementing the Comics Code, the industry's largest publishers had not only managed to avert the moral panic over comic books that had started hurting their financial interests, but also to dispose of much of their competition.

In their final issues, the EC comics ran a short essay titled "In Memoriam." Insisting that "the charges against horror and crime comics are utter nonsense," it concedes: "We are forced to capitulate. We give up. WE'VE HAD IT!" The final issue (#28) of *The Haunt of Fear* featured a story called "The Prude," introduced by a crying Old Witch. Its main character is a thinly disguised version of Fredric Wertham: a self-proclaimed guardian of morals and decency who, driven by professional ambition as well as by unresolved feelings of personal guilt, knows no boundaries in his egomaniacal and tyrannical fight for censorship. The rebellious publisher's sole survivor, *Mad*, had to be reformatted as the larger-sized *Mad Magazine* in order to escape the regulations of the Comics Code. Several other relatively small publishers that had also started targeting older readers were forced out of business completely by the end of 1956, most notably Quality Comics ("The Spirit" and "Plastic Man"), Lev Gleason Publications (*Crime Does Not Pay*), and Ace Comics (various crime and horror titles).

Many of the cartoonists who had been creating comic books targeted at older readers turned their backs on the industry. Severely restricted in their creativity and discouraged in their ambitions, they started looking for work in the more lively and lucrative fields of magazine illustration (Jack Cole, Harvey Kurtzman) or advertisement (former EC regulars Johnny Craig, Jack Davis, and Jack Kamen). Will Eisner, once hopeful to explore the medium's artistic potential and help raise its cultural status, increasingly focused on the

production of instructional comics for various companies and government-related agencies. Hardly any new creators would enter the industry until the mid-1960s.^{xiii} Comic-book artist Neal Adams remembers: “When I told people [in 1959] that I wanted to get into comics, they said, ‘It’s dead. There’s nobody... forget about it.’ And I found it to be true” (Schutz and Kitchen: 15). Those left behind in the comic-book industry felt trapped and certainly were not proud of their occupation. Will Eisner remembers:

“There was a sense of dealing in drugs, I suppose – that comics were illegitimate merchandise... The whole period of the Kefauver Hearings was a shaking thing. There’s no question about it. Working in comics at that time wasn’t something your mother could tell her bridge ladies about. She was not proud of it. They put a stinking name on it” (Schutz and Brownstein: 119-21).

According to Neal Adams, a sense of shame was omnipresent: “I thought I’d meet people who were proud of what they did. Nobody I met was proud... I’d constantly talk to guys who were ashamed” (Schutz and Brownstein: 49).

The press was pleased with the changes wrought by the Code. In 1955, the *New York Times Magazine* described the Code as “a welcome sign”; the *Christian Century* reported that the “level of popular taste” had been raised (quoted in Beaty: 162-63); *Time* observed that “publishers of ‘good’ comics are as much opposed to horror books as anyone... [The CMAA] moved against ‘the aggressive minority trying to make a fast buck with horror comics’...” (quoted in Lopes: 54). In 1956, *Reader’s Digest* reported that

“[t]wo years ago newsstands in this country were piled high with comic books that dripped depravity, obscenity and violence. Today there is a new look... In a spontaneous grass-roots movement groups of citizens

across the nation rose up and, with nothing but the spirit of their decency to guide them, drove the dirty books off the stands and their peddlers to cover..." (quoted in Lopes: 55).

By early 1957, the *Ladies' Home Journal* came to the conclusion: "What have been the actual results? The worst of the crime and horror comics no longer are sold." What is more, according to the magazine, adults "have been able to mold tastes of the youngsters so that many no longer care for comics" (quoted in Lopes: 55, 56). As elements of subversion and moral complexity had been all but eliminated from comic books, teenaged and young adult readers had indeed turned their backs on the medium in droves. In combination with other factors, such as major distribution problems^{xiii} and the rapidly increasing popularity of television, this development contributed to the industry's first serious recession after one and a half decades of continuous growth. From 1952 to 1956, the number of comic-book titles had dropped roughly from 630 to 250, and readership had declined from around sixty to thirty-five million (Sabin 1993: 163). The recession continued until 1959, when the industry stabilized at a sales level it would roughly maintain throughout the 1960s (Gabilliet: 46-47). The romance, funny animal, humor, western, fantasy, teen, and TV-adaptation genres dominated the second half of the 1950s, but even they had become safer and blander than ever.

The rise of the youth market all around the Code-controlled comic-book medium from the mid-1950s on indicates, however, that former comic-book readers had not been "converted" to adult tastes and values, as the *Ladies' Home Journal* optimistically assumed. Rather, these "youngsters" turned to other media that, in contrast to comic books, started catering directly and openly to their own tastes and interests. The teen population in the United States doubled in the twenty years between 1950 and 1970, growing from 10 to 15 million in the course of the 1950s and reaching the 20 million mark by the end of the

1960s. Even though full-time youth employment had declined after the war, a combination of part-time work and parental allowances ensured that the average income of young Americans continued to rise (Osgerby: 20-21). By the mid-1950s, teenagers had become a target group too profitable to be neglected any longer by the consumer industries at large. Hollywood was discovering the teen audience with movies such as *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel without a Cause* (both 1955). Record companies began adjusting a product called rock 'n' roll to the tastes of white middle-class consumers, a marketing strategy that would come into full bloom with the breakthrough of "teen idol" Elvis Presley in 1956.

Rates of juvenile crime, to be sure, were still reported to be on the rise towards the end of the decade as they remained unaffected by the Comics Code. Criticisms, however, had lost their sting, and discussions of comic books had all but disappeared from the national media. With the stagnation of the Red Scare, the notion of social change gradually appeared in a more positive light. The harbingers of social change, the young, were now more often connoted with fun and freedom than with trouble and violence. In the popular media, "youth" came to signify the arrival of a dynamic and leisure-oriented consumer culture. John F. Kennedy most prominently mobilized the improved connotations of youth in the public persona his presidential campaign was based on. Yet just when teenage desire was in the process of becoming a respectable marketing tool, the former pioneer of youth culture, the comic book, had effectively deserted its adolescent audience, promoting the infallibility of the status quo instead of celebrating the auspicious promises of youth.

ⁱ For this chapter, the following comic-book reprint anthologies were used: Benson, J. (ed.) 1982e, 1985c, 1985e; Cochran, R. (annotations) 1979e; Eisner, W. 2004.

ⁱⁱ From 1940 to 1960, the real gross national product increased roughly from \$200 billion to \$500 billion, while the number of adults sharing this wealth was declining due to low birth rates during the Depression and war years (Whitfield: 70).

iii When Eisenhower's 1954 State of the Union address proposed depriving communists of their citizenship, a national poll revealed that eighty percent of the populace agreed with the suggestion, fifty-two percent wanted to see all communists jailed, and forty-two percent expressed their conviction that no member of the press had the right to criticize the "American form of government." The Communist Control Act of the same year defined communism as "a clear, present and continuing danger to the security of the United States," depriving the Party of "all rights, privileges, and immunities attendant upon legal bodies" (quoted in Whitfield: 49).

iv Already during the Second World War, "juvenile delinquency" had become a much-debated public issue, inadequately referring to shifts in adolescent behavior brought about by early signs of an emerging youth culture. Some of the agitation against so-called juvenile delinquency implicitly took aim at the changing role of women during the war, as the working mothers' absence from home was named one of the problem's major components.

v The political influences of community decency crusades, campaigns usually organized by church groups, women's clubs or parent-teacher initiatives, has been traced back to the nineteenth century by Nyberg (22-23). Self-appointed and not accountable to any legal body, such committees claim for themselves the right and moral obligation to screen popular products for what they consider "subversive" or "un-American" statements.

vi During the early 1950s, EC Comics routinely signaled disregard for adult concerns about the effects of comic-book consumption on young minds by addressing readers as "kiddies" or "little monsters," even though most of their readers were teenagers and young adults. The horror story "Minor Error" in *The Haunt of Fear* #13 implicitly ridicules such adult concerns, featuring a young boy who, after reading an issue of *The Haunt of Fear*, is unable to tell fiction and reality apart and starts to believe his new neighbor is a vampire. Even though the boy turns out to be wrong, it is revealed in the end that the neighbor's nephew *is* in fact a vampire. The EC comic book has thus put its young reader on the right track after all – a conclusion the real reader was invited to apply to the publisher's subversive agenda at large.

vii Bart Beaty has recently described the notion that subversive story content could have contributed to the anti-comic-book crusaders' targeting of EC comics as a "myth" planted by Bill Gaines himself and subsequently spread by EC fans (2005: 203-04). My analysis of the ideological dimension of the Comics Code that would ultimately be implemented, however, will strongly suggest that the targeting of ideologically subversive publishers and genres was no coincidence.

viii EC horror artist Johnny Craig in retrospect regrets this development:

"The problem was, I think, that the reader became accustomed to the stories and gradually felt a lessening of their impact. They clamored for more and our competitors, trying to copy and outdo us, gave it to them. We, in turn, had to compete with that. It just became a vicious circle" (Benson 1982e: notes and comments to #37).

Craig's perspective finds expression in the story "The Pit" in the final issue of *The Vault of Horror* (#40), where various organizers of fighting competitions attempt to top each other's bloodthirstiness until there is no survivor left.

^{ix} DC, Marvel, and Dell Comics accounted for over forty percent of all comic books with a 1954 cover date, followed (in number of titles and print runs) by Archie and Harvey Comics, according to the estimates of Jean-Paul Gabilliet (41-44).

^x The two other publishers that refused to join the CMAA were Dell and Gilberton. Their motives for not joining were very different from EC's, though. While Gaines was fundamentally opposed to the association's strategy of giving in to the critics' accusations and their underlying ideological assumptions, Dell and Gilberton claimed to be above the industry's desire to clear its name. Both publishers denied having anything in common with those publishers that had come under attack, most notably EC. Dell had been focusing on licensed child-oriented material while Gilberton's bestseller had been the comparatively uncontroversial *Classics Illustrated*. Both publishers managed to dissociate themselves from the controversy by claiming to produce "wholesome" or "culturally valuable" material, and the sales of their titles did not suffer even though they did not carry the "Seal of Approval." When EC offered its comics without the "Seal of Approval," however, most wholesalers and retailers feared a public outcry and returned the packages unopened.

^{xi} Bart Beaty claims that "nothing in the Comics Code would have prevented comic book publishers from creating the type of mature, sensitive, and adult-themed texts that were so popular with, for instance, filmgoers and television viewers"; that nothing in the Code "would have forbidden a comic book story of... moral complexity"; and that the real problem was the industry's "refusal to grow up" under the restrictions of the Code (2005: 206). It has been demonstrated above, however, that this was clearly not the case. The Code enforced an idealized portrayal of the status quo that left no room for moral or ideological complexity, and it did this at a time when other media such as music and film were starting to reflect a growing desire for social change.

^{xii} Two notable exceptions entering the field during this period were Roy Thomas and Archie Goodwin.

^{xiii} The American News Company, distributor of more than half of all comic books published in the United States, pulled out of magazine distribution following federal antitrust action in 1955, leaving many comic-book publishers without a way to distribute their titles. Moreover, the small retail establishments that had been a major venue for the medium, drug stores and candy stores in particular, were starting to vanish as the middle class moved to the suburbs, where neighborhood stores were rare.

Concluding Remarks: Overview and Outlookⁱ

As I have detailed above, the marketing strategies of the comic-book industry went through significant changes from 1938 to 1954. During the Depression and war years, most comic books provided power fantasies for young readers who had never before been directly targeted by the consumer industries – a marketing strategy that threatened the cultural status quo and undermined the authority of parents and teachers. In an attempt to appease critics, these initially sociocritical comics gradually started promoting more establishment-friendly meanings, first through isolated reflexive devices and then through a fundamental redefinition of their heroes.

As the demand for power fantasies waned after the war, a greater variety of comic books was created to appeal to a more diverse audience. Like most other popular products of the time, the vast majority of the post-war comic books propagated established institutions and traditional values. By the early 1950s, however, some comic books, particularly those targeted at the growing number of older readers, started painting a more critical picture of American society. Comic books could address and exploit the period's undercurrents of doubt and fear more freely than the tightly-censored competing visual media of film and television. Some even depicted approvingly the increasingly apparent weakening of the boundaries of class, gender, race, and age – social changes that were widely condemned by other popular media. In these ideologically subversive comics, reflexive devices promoted a critical reading position and the construction of an alternative and defiant cultural space.

Ironically, it was this targeting of older adolescent and adult readers – not the revolutionary targeting of young adolescents and children – that made the comic-book industry more vulnerable to criticism and ultimately resulted in the implementation of the Comics Code.

Though critics of the medium claimed to be concerned with protecting the young from unsuitable publications, their attacks actually focussed on comic books read predominantly by adults rather than children. The ideologically subversive content of these comics was a hidden target of many attacks, and the Comics Code accordingly demanded first and foremost an uncritical portrayal of the status quo. Rather than protecting the young from media and market exploitation, the Code confirmed the consumer industries' right to target children, so long as their products idealized the powers that be. What is more, it implicitly required that comic books be targeted primarily at children.

The Code would be revised several times, most notably in 1971 and 1989, but its authority would gradually decline over the years. By 2011, the last publishers would discontinue their participation in the Comics Code Authority. Nevertheless, as I intend to outline in conclusion, the Code's effects on the medium are still evident today in the dominance of the superhero genre, in the targeting of comic books at devoted fans, and in the public perception of comic books as a children's medium.

In the aftermath of the comic-book industry's recession of the mid-1950s, the superhero genre that had all but disappeared from the stands since the end of World War II gradually reclaimed its dominant position within the comic-book market. Its brand of power fantasies, after all, had always primarily appealed to preadolescent readers, and preadolescent readers had once again become the medium's core audience as a result of the Code requirements. Moreover, the genre's inherent celebration of powerful and typically male authority figures was a perfect fit for a Code designed to safeguard the patriarchal status quo. The hugely attractive target audience of post-war baby boomers was starting to reach adolescence shortly after the implementation of the Code, however, and by the decade's end the period of high birth rates was coming to an end. The market of the 1960s and early 70s would be

dominated by teenagers and young adults. Under the harsh restrictions of the Code, the comic-book industry was faced with the challenge of adapting to these market developments and reaching beyond its preadolescent audience.

A key strategy employed to appeal to the rapidly growing and increasingly confident teenage demographic was the development of youthful heroes who, unlike their young predecessors modeled after Robin the Boy Wonder, were not relegated to mere sidekick status. The single most influential character in this regard was the adolescent Peter Parker, alias Spider-Man. Launched by Marvel in 1962, he was not initiated into the world of superheroes by an adult authority figure, but had to learn the ropes by himself, gradually developing his own sense of responsibility and his own methods. In the tradition of characters like Plastic Man and Marvel's own pre-1941 Sub-Mariner, he had human weaknesses and character flaws; yet he did not lose his youthful exuberance and grew with the challenges and tasks he faced. Within the ideological limitations of the Code, the stories thus acknowledged the decade's quintessential process of youth empowerment and its sense of optimism about the future.

Despite the superhero revival that is typically celebrated by comic-book historians as the beginning of the medium's "Silver Age,"ⁱⁱ though, the comic-book industry's total output in 1962 was less than half that of the early 1950s (Wright: 182). The market had stabilized since the recession of the mid-1950s, but it became more and more obvious that under the restrictions of the Code, comic books would be unable to regain their status as youth culture's most popular product. Comic books were no longer the cheapest form of visual entertainment; instead, television now provided for free a visual experience similar to the one that had previously been restricted to comparatively expensive movie theatres, becoming the most popular source of family entertainment. To be sure, most television

programs were the rather bland products of consensus culture as they were produced for the whole family and dominated by large commercial interests. Unlike other industries targeting the increasingly rebellious young baby boomers, however, the comic-book industry was unable to sufficiently differentiate itself from the predictability of television. Barred by the Code from telling morally ambiguous or sociocritical stories, or depicting youth rebellion in anything but a negative light, the comic-book industry of the 1960s could not compete with the music and film industries for the growing audience of teenaged baby boomers.

Instead, comic-book publishers looked for ways to reconnect with the older demographic of young adults who had grown up with superhero comic books during the late Depression and war years, but had since then left the medium behind. To this end, they framed the Code-enforced redundancy and predictability of their basic superhero plot elements with metatextual devices aimed specifically at these young adults, inviting them to reanimate and cultivate their relationship with the genre. Much like in the EC comics earlier in the decade, letter columns were introduced to encourage the textual fan productivity that had all but vanished with the demise of EC. The genre's core audience of children continued to be rewarded with the pleasures of identification, but in addition older and more experienced readers were provided with opportunities to take on a nostalgic and benevolently amused reading position, to play with the duality of their reading position as it alternated between detachment and involvement.

In order to encourage direct communication between fans, publishers started to include the senders' complete addresses in their letter columns. Particularly devoted fans could now compile mailing lists of other readers who might be interested in their fanzines, and by the mid-1960s the circulation of fanzines devoted to comic books reached its all-time high.ⁱⁱⁱ

The product of what John Fiske calls a “shadow cultural economy” (1992b: 30), fanzines were conveniently removed from the restrictions of the Comics Code as well as from the comic-book publishers’ wider commercial considerations, and were free to articulate the objects of their affection with meanings that would not have met the approval of the Comics Code Authority or the publisher’s editorial board. They took advantage of this freedom, spoofing and parodying the predictability and ideological simplicity of the typical Code-approved comic book in ways the comic books themselves could not without upsetting the Comics Code Authority or alienating their younger readers. While the fanzines of the 1960s did not confront the post-Code comic-book landscape as aggressively as the underground comix would in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they did promote a historical perspective marked by a mixture of nostalgia and irony that created a certain amount of breathing space from the meanings the Comics Code Authority was trying to enforce. In the process, they helped develop and define the fan community. DC and other publishers used the fanzines as promotional tools, competing for the fans’ affection by providing “pro contributions” such as artwork, short essays, letters or interviews.

As the potential for a broadening of their audiences was very limited under the Code restrictions, both Marvel and DC increasingly pursued a strategy of demanding a higher level of commitment from their *existing* audience by forcing a sense of continuity that comic books had never had before. Different titles were cross-referenced, their narratives linked. By 1967 the narrative web between DC titles was so vast that a single panel could feature as many as four footnotes referring to four issues of four different titles, all of them relevant to the current storyline (*Justice League of America* #51). In order to fully appreciate these interrelated narratives, readers were required not only to follow a whole line of titles, but also to build a personal library of comic books that would allow them to look up plot elements or character nuances that had been developed in previous issues and

had suddenly become relevant to current storylines. Readers, in other words, were required to become collectors as well as regular customers, a development that further nurtured the growth of fan culture.

While both Marvel and DC had been able to win back some highly productive and passionate older readers, and Marvel's youthful heroes had even been able to attract the occasional baby boomer, the vast majority of adolescents and adults continued to view comic books as an inferior form of children's entertainment. Older readers who publicly displayed their continued or rediscovered fondness for the medium were widely regarded with contempt and dismay, an evaluation that found expression in the mass media from the mid-1960s on. An influential *Newsweek* article titled "Superfans and Batmaniacs" from 15 February, 1965, for example, referred to adult fans as "the comic cultists," casting them as maladjusted, obsessive, tasteless outcasts (Schelly: 90).

To these fans, the notion of a fictional universe to which they alone held the key could be appealing. It not only further distinguished the fan community, clearly marking the boundary between this community and the rest of the world, but gave fans the opportunity to brush off as unqualified any criticisms or defamations of non-fans. Those lacking fan knowledge, fans could now argue, were simply unqualified to comment on the topic of comic books as they were unable to fully grasp their complexity. Fans could materially signal their fan status through a collection, and they could invest in the difference between themselves and non-fans by accumulating more and more unofficial cultural capital in the form of comic books. The greater the fan's knowledge of the superhero universe, and the bigger the fan's comic-book collection, the more protected the fan could feel from the dominant value system's denigration of the medium.

In summary, the interplay between the creation of superhero universes and the arrival of what Bill Schelly labels the “Golden Age of comic fandom”^{iv} can be identified as a defensive reaction on the part of both comic-book producers and consumers to the Comics Code Authority’s attempt to regulate meanings, to the growing popularity of television and the changing demographics that were reducing the potential comic-book audience, and to the dominant value system’s denigration of the medium. Though the Comics Code Authority gradually lost its influence over the decades, the public perception of comic books as a medium suitable only for children and nostalgic collectors persisted – a perception that the comic-book industry itself had promoted in the aftermath of the Code’s implementation, and that has still not been completely overcome today. To be sure, underground comix targeting casual older readers with content forbidden by the Code became moderately popular between 1968 and 1975, and evolved into what has become known as alternative comics from the 1980s on, but the comic-book market is currently still dominated by – and widely identified with – the superhero genre.

Competition from other media, particularly for young consumers, has increased sharply in recent decades, and the comic-book market has been in a longstanding decline (despite the brief speculator boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s). While superheroes have reached an audience of billions in media such as film, television and video games, the genre’s comic-book narratives have – short-lived attempts to streamline the universes aside – become increasingly continuity-dense and fan-oriented. Today’s comic-book market is dominated by adult fans willing to spend considerable amounts of time and money on their superhero universe of choice. Even though the Comics Code is gone, the marketing and reading strategies that had been developed under its influence are still in effect today. The comic-book industry, in other words, has been unable to step out of the shadow of its self-imposed Code.

ⁱ For the concluding remarks, the following comic-book reprint anthology was used: Fox, G. et al. 2001b.

ⁱⁱ Duin and Richardson, for example, define the “Silver Age” as the

“era in comics history [that] marked the major revival of comic books following the collapse of EC and the surrender to the Comics Code Authority. Although the first appearance of the Martian Manhunter in *Detective #225* (November 1955) was an eye-popping prelude, the Silver Age officially began with *Showcase #4* (September/October 1956). It ended with the final 12-cent issues of comics in 1969” (404).

According to Patrick Parsons, however, estimates of monthly circulation indicate no overall growth of the comic-book market during the so-called Silver Age (Pearson and Uricchio: 68). The superhero revival ensured the continuation of an industry that had been in decline since 1954, but it was not as commercially successful as the current multimedia presence of Silver Age characters like Spider-Man might suggest. Like the term “Golden Age,” then, the term “Silver Age” should not be used to refer to the popular status of comic books in general, but merely to that of the superhero genre in particular.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to fandom historian Bill Schelly, the number of comic-slanted fanzines jumped from at least fourteen in 1963 to at least 192 in 1966 (54, 99).

^{iv} Defining fanzines and comicons as the buiding blocks of comic-book fandom, Bill Schelly describes the years 1961 to 1972 as “the Golden Age of comic fandom” (158).

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Zusammenfassung

Introduction / Einleitung

Die Einleitung steckt den theoretischen Rahmen der vorliegenden Arbeit ab. Bevor sie sich im Detail dem kultur- und medientheoretischen Ansatz der Cultural Studies zuwendet, welcher der vorliegenden Arbeit als Grundlage dient, zeichnet sie zunächst die Wurzeln der Cultural Studies in den Texten des italienischen Neomarxisten Antonio Gramsci nach. Gramsci hatte "Hegemonie" als eine Form ideologischer Manipulation definiert, welche die bestehenden Machtstrukturen einer kapitalistischen Gesellschaft zu festigen versucht, in diesem Bestreben jedoch stets mit oppositionellen Gegenströmungen konfrontiert wird. Dieser fortwährende Machtkampf findet, so die These der Cultural Studies, in populärkulturellen Produkten Ausdruck, deren Bedeutung nicht gänzlich vom Produzenten kontrolliert werden kann, sondern vom Konsumenten mitbestimmt wird.

Um ein möglichst breites Publikum zu erreichen und Profit zu erzielen, müsse ein Produkt der Populärkultur von Konsumenten unterschiedlichster sozialer Herkunft als relevant empfunden werden. Dies könne nur gelingen, wenn das Produkt unterschiedliche Lesarten zulässt. Die Analyse eines solchen Produkts im Sinne der Cultural Studies kann niemals alle möglichen Lesarten erfassen, sondern muss stets kontextabhängig bleiben. Ziel der Analyse ist es, ausgewählte Aspekte eines Kulturprodukts mit relevanten historischen Diskursen in Verbindung zu bringen ("to articulate with"), um so Einblick in historische Machtstrukturen zu gewinnen.

Auf konkrete Methoden der Textanalyse oder einen bestimmten theoretischen Ansatz legen sich Cultural Studies nicht fest; dem Kulturwissenschaftler stehe das gesamte Spektrum zeitgemäßer Theorien und Methoden zur Verfügung. Die Relevanz einer Theorie und die Effektivität einer Methode sei sowohl vom Gegenstand der Analyse als auch von den Intentionen des Kulturwissenschaftlers abhängig. Dieser pragmatische Ansatz der Cultural Studies erlaubt es mir, das Medium der Comics aus unterschiedlichen Blickwinkeln zu beleuchten und, so weit das im Rahmen dieser Arbeit möglich ist, in seinem vielfältigen und oft widersprüchlichen Zusammenspiel mit den Machtdiskursen seiner Zeit zu erfassen. Dabei bemühe ich mich um eine ausgewogene Berücksichtigung der Bereiche Produktion ("production"), Rezeption ("consumption")

und Text (“textuality”). Im Rahmen der Textanalyse gilt mein besonderes Augenmerk den ideologischen Dimensionen von Figuren und Genres; ich werde z.B. vor dem Hintergrund relevanter historischer Entwicklungen untersuchen, wie Figuren und Genres im Laufe der Zeit umdefiniert werden, welchen Popularitätsschwankungen sie unterliegen und wie sie von reflexiven Comics dargestellt werden.

Chapter 1 / Kapitel 1

Kapitel 1 verfolgt die beiden grundlegenden Komponenten der Sprache des Comics, Wort und Bild, zurück zu ihren gemeinsamen Ursprüngen in Bildzeichen und Ideogramm. Es zeichnet nach, wie Wort und Bild zunächst mit der Einführung des Alphabets in Kanaan gegen 1500 v.Chr. voneinander getrennt und später vom Alten Testament als einander entgegengesetzte Bereiche definiert wurden: Das Wort allein ermögliche Zugang zu göttlicher Wahrheit; das Bild dagegen berge die Gefahr der Irreführung und des Niedergangs. Versuche, diese verordnete Dichotomie rational zu rechtfertigen, können auf die ebenso problematische wie einflussreiche antike Vorstellung vom Bild als “natürlichem Zeichen” jenseits kultureller Konvention zurückgeführt werden.

Das subversive Potenzial des Bildes wurde erstmals im 16. Jahrhundert während der Reformation deutlich, als die Druckerpresse zur Massenproduktion von Bilddrucken genutzt wurde, um des Lesens unkundige Teile der Bevölkerung gegen das Monopol der katholischen Kirche zu mobilisieren. Auch in gebildeten Kreisen erfuhr das Bild während der Renaissance eine Aufwertung; Buchillustrationen waren weit verbreitet. Begleitet wurden diese Entwicklungen von Zensurbestrebungen, denn westeuropäische Machthaber sahen in der wachsenden Popularität des Bildes die Gefahr politischer Machtverschiebungen.

Mit dem Aufkommen moderner Wissenschaft im Zuge der Aufklärung verschärfte sich die elitäre Ablehnung des Bildes. Das Bild wurde zum Feind wissenschaftlicher Methodik und Bildung erklärt und wegen seiner Zugänglichkeit und seines Einflusses jenseits institutionalisierter Bildung gefürchtet. Bedeutungstiefe, zeitliche Dimension und die Macht der Einflussnahme wurden dem Wort allein zugeschrieben, während der Zuständigkeitsbereich des Bildes von diesen Diskursen ausgegrenzt und auf den Ausdruck von Schönheit beschränkt wurde: eine Konstellation, die der Diskreditierung aussagekräftiger (d.h. potenziell politisch einflussreicher) Bilder diene, und somit der Rechtfertigung und Festigung bestehender Machtverhältnisse.

Trotz solch konservativer Indoktrination florierten in England seit dem 17. Jahrhundert anonym und kostengünstig produzierte “Broadsheets” und ab dem frühen 19. Jahrhundert sogenannte “Comicals,” deren oft subversiver narrativer Gehalt

vornehmlich von Bildern zum Ausdruck gebracht wurde, die aber auch Wörter integrierten. In einem zunehmend industrialisierten England konnte der Siegeszug des Bildes ebenso wenig aufgehalten werden wie, wenig später, in den zunehmend industrialisierten Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika. "Cartoon" und Fotografie wurden ein fester Bestandteil des aufkommenden Magazin- und Zeitungsmarktes.

Film und Comic-Strip erweiterten mit großem kommerziellen Erfolg ab dem späten 19. Jahrhundert den narrativen Gehalt des Bildes, indem sie zeitlich bzw. räumlich ausgedehnte Bildsequenzen schufen. Beide Medien machten deutlich, dass Bilder, ähnlich wie Wörter, Symbole sind; dass sie Bedeutungstiefe und eine zeitliche Dimension und damit Zugang zu Machtdiskursen haben. Film und Comic-Strip widerlegten so die konventionelle Vorstellung vom Bild als transparentem und "natürlichem" Zeichen, eine Vorstellung, die den privilegierten Status des Wortes (und damit der gebildeten Elite) jahrhundertlang gerechtfertigt hatte.

Der zweite Teil des ersten Kapitels widmet sich jenen Aspekten des frühen Comic-Strips, die später für das Comic-Heft relevant werden sollten. Es zeichnet die Entwicklung sprachlicher Elemente wie Sprechblase, Bildsymbolik und Lautmalerei nach. Zudem untersucht es die Wechselwirkung zwischen formalen (räumliche Grenzen, Fortsetzungsprinzip) und inhaltlichen (Genre, Hauptfiguren, Ideologie) Aspekten sowie die sich daraus ergebenden Konsequenzen für die Bezeichnung ("Comics") und den kulturellen Status des Mediums. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit gilt den Auswirkungen der Großen Depression, die auch das Entstehen der Comic-Heft-Industrie maßgebend beeinflussen sollte.

Anschließend wird die Entstehung des Mediums Comic-Heft als schrittweiser Lösungsprozess von den Medien Comic-Strip und Zeitung beschrieben. Die Vermarktung des Comic-Strips wurde erstmals von jener der Zeitung getrennt, als Comic-Strip-Serien sporadisch in Magazin- und Buchform nachgedruckt wurden. Der nächste Schritt in Richtung Comic-Heft im heutigen Sinn waren in regelmäßigen Abständen erscheinende Sammlungen nachgedruckter Comic-Strips, die an Zeitungskiosken verkauft wurden. Unabhängig von Zeitungsverlagen produzierte Comics erschienen zunächst illegal im amerikanischen Untergrund, dann auch legal in lizenzierter Form. Allmählich wurden

die erzählten Geschichten über mehrere Seiten ausgedehnt und begannen, den noch heute handelsüblichen Comic-Heften zu ähneln. Die Zukunft des Comic-Hefts war allerdings erst gesichert, als das Superhelden-Genre kommerziellen Erfolg brachte.

Chapter 2 / Kapitel 2

Sogenannte “Shops,” die sich auf die Produktion von Original-Comic-Heften (solchen, die nicht einfach Comic-Strips aus Zeitungen nachdruckten) spezialisierten und Verlage belieferten, entstanden in den U.S.A. ab 1936. Sie produzierten Comics nach der Fließbandmethode: Für Plot, Dialog, Layout, Vorder- und Hintergrund, Tinte, Farbe und das Editieren waren jeweils andere Mitarbeiter zuständig – eine Form der Arbeitsteilung, die noch heute in der Comicindustrie die Regel ist. Damals wurden die Shops auch “Sweat Shops” genannt, weil die dortigen Arbeitsbedingungen, besonders während der Großen Depression, schlecht bis menschenunwürdig waren. Die Produktionskosten wurden sehr gering gehalten, weil die Verlage den Shops keine hohen Summen für Produkte zahlen wollten, deren kommerzieller Erfolg ungewiss war. Der Handel mit Comic-Heften war risikoreich, weil der Zwischenhändler, der sowohl Comic-Hefte als auch Zeitungen an die Kiosks weiterverkaufte, einerseits auf hohe Auflagen und andererseits auf das Recht bestand, übriggebliebene Comics an die Verlage zurückzuschicken.

Als die Verlage ab den 40er Jahren ihre Comic-Hefte zunehmend in Eigenproduktion herstellten, übernahmen sie die Produktionsmethoden der Shops. Diese änderten sich selbst dann nur unwesentlich, als einige Verlage erhebliche Gewinne zu erwirtschaften begannen. Die meisten Mitarbeiter blieben anonym und damit austauschbar. Diese Anonymität war vielen Zeichnern sogar recht, weil sie, besorgt um persönliches Ansehen und berufliche Zukunft, nicht öffentlich mit der Comicindustrie in Verbindung gebracht werden wollten.

Die Rechte an den Figuren der Comic-Hefte sicherten sich die Verlage vertraglich, so dass sie die Schöpfer einer Figur jederzeit entlassen und die Serie anderen Angestellten übergeben konnten. Auch die Schöpfer Supermans, also jener Figur, die das Comic-Heft als Bestandteil der amerikanischen Kulturlandschaft etablierte, unterschrieben einen solchen Vertrag. Während Superman seinem Herausgeber DC ungeahnt hohe Umsätze zu beschern begann, wurden seine Schöpfer Siegel und Shuster zunehmend durch andere Angestellte ersetzt. Es kam zum Rechtsstreit, doch der Oberste Gerichtshof

bestätigte mit einem richtungsweisenden Urteil den Verlag als alleinigen Eigentümer des Urheberrechts an der Figur.

Das Superman-Konzept wurde von DC und anderen Verlagen vielfach nachgeahmt, und das entstehende Superhelden-Genre sollte den rasant wachsenden Markt für Comic-Hefte bis zum Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs dominieren. Im Jahr 1941 beschuldigte DC seinen erfolgreichsten Konkurrenten, den Verlag Fawcett, der illegalen Nachahmung des Superman-Konzepts und reichte Klage ein. Fawcett, dessen Held Captain Marvel DCs Superman nicht ähnlicher war als die vielen anderen Superhelden dieser Jahre, wurde von den Vorwürfen freigesprochen. DC legte jedoch mehrfach Berufung ein, bis Fawcett sich wegen der durch die gerichtliche Verteidigung entstandenen Kosten gezwungen sah, die Veröffentlichung seiner Captain Marvel-Serien einzustellen. Ironischerweise stellte DC wenig später den Schöpfer der meisten Captain Marvel-Comics selbst an, um seine Superman-Serien dem einst so erfolgreichen Captain Marvel-Konzept anzupassen.

Die überwältigende Mehrheit aller 8-bis-17-jährigen U.S.-Amerikaner las von den frühen 40er Jahren an pro Monat regelmäßig mehrere Comic-Hefte. Diese Zielgruppe war bisher von der Industrie nur über den Umweg der Eltern erreicht worden, und viele Eltern empfanden die neue Marketing-Strategie des direkten Abzielsens auf ihre Kinder als besorgniserregend. Die zugängliche, von Schulbildung unabhängige visuelle Grammatik des Mediums erregte Misstrauen, und dieses Misstrauen wurde von einer spätestens seit der Großen Depression weit verbreiteten Skepsis gegenüber der Massenproduktion des Maschinenzeitalters noch verstärkt. Auch die schlechte Papier- und Druckqualität der frühen Comic-Hefte trugen dazu bei, dass das Medium in den Augen vieler Erwachsener zum Paradebeispiel für die Schattenseiten der sich unaufhaltsam ausbreitenden Massenkommunikation wurde.

Ein Generationenkonflikt, der seine Wurzeln in langwierigen und tiefgreifenden sozialen Veränderungen (Industrialisierung; revolutionäre Entwicklung in der Kommunikation; rasant steigende Schülerzahlen die daraus resultierende Jugendkultur; Gefährdung traditioneller puritanischer Werte durch neue Ideale der Selbstverwirklichung und -darstellung, der Freizeit, des Vergnügens) hatte, begann kommerziellen Ausdruck zu finden und somit sichtbarer zu werden. Comic-Hefte wurden zum (an)greifbaren

Symbol für diesen Generationenkonflikt, ihre Popularität unter Kindern und Jugendlichen zum Gradmesser des Rückgangs elterlicher Autorität. Kulturelle Meinungsführer, puritanische Moral und intellektueller Liberalismus waren in ihrer Ablehnung des neuen Mediums vereint – zum Leidwesen der Schöpfer und Leser der Hefte. Diese Ablehnung sollte allerdings erst in den späten 40er und frühen 50er Jahren zu einem ausgewachsenen “Feldzug” gegen das Medium anschwellen.

Chapter 3 / Kapitel 3

Kapitel 3 untersucht konkrete Textbeispiele der Jahre 1938 bis 1941, also der vom Superhelden-Genre dominierten Frühphase des Comic-Hefts. Zunächst umreißt es die historischen (kulturellen, wirtschaftlichen, sozialen, sprachlichen) Wurzeln des Superhelden-Konzepts. Mit Superman wird dann der erste Superheld und die einflussreichste Figur in der Geschichte des Mediums vorgestellt. Die duale Identität der Figur (Superman alias Clark Kent) wird auf populäre maskierte Helden der Pulp Magazine zurückgeführt und vor dem Hintergrund von Urbanisierung und Industrialisierung diskutiert. Traditionelle Charakteristika des westlichen Helden wie Unabhängigkeit und Eigenständigkeit, so die These, wurden im zunehmend von Interdependenz und Konformität geprägten Industriezeitalter zur Herausforderung. Das heldenhafte Ich entkam dem Systemzwang seiner Zeit, indem es sich durch eine Maske oder ein Kostüm von ihm distanzierte – eine Maßnahme, die der traditionelle Westernheld noch nicht hatte treffen müssen.

Eine der wichtigsten narrativen Funktionen der dualen Identität Supermans ist die aus ihr resultierende “Dreiecksbeziehung” zwischen Superman / Clark Kent und Lois Lane. Lois ist eine Arbeitskollegin, in die sich der scheinbar furchtsame Zeitungsreporter Clark verliebt, deren Herz jedoch allein Superman gehört. Superman seinerseits ist zu sehr von seinem Heldentum in Anspruch genommen, als dass er sich auf eine romantische Beziehung einlassen könnte. Von unzähligen Superhelden-Serien nachgeahmt, erlaubte diese Konstellation den Lesern einerseits die Identifikation mit dem (scheinbar) wenig heldenhaften Clark, andererseits die Projektion ihrer Wünsche auf den bewunderten und begehrten Superman. Gerade die Unmöglichkeit von Intimität machte diese Form der “Dreiecksbeziehung” beliebt bei Kindern und jungen Heranwachsenden, die sich mit dem Thema Sexualität nur aus sicherer Entfernung auseinandersetzen wollten.

Die Tatsache, dass sich die Identifikationsfigur Clark Kent in die berufstätige und stolze Lois Lane verliebt, verweist auf wachsende gesellschaftliche Akzeptanz für eine unabhängigere Rolle der Frau. Allerdings beweist das Handlungsmuster der auf ein männliches Publikum zugeschnittenen Superman-Comics, dass Lois Lane nicht wirklich so unabhängig ist, wie sie denkt. Immer wieder muss sie auf der Suche nach einer Story

in höchster Not von Superman gerettet werden. Der Held findet auf diese Weise Gelegenheit, sowohl die physische Herausforderung der Außenwelt als auch die psychische Herausforderung seiner eigenen, traditionell als weiblich charakterisierten Sehnsucht nach zwischenmenschlicher Wärme (personifiziert in seiner entmachteten, d.h. tendenziell “weiblichen” Clark-Kent-Identität) zu meistern. Die Hauptfunktion des narrativen Elements Lois Lane ist es, die Hyper-Maskulinität des Helden zu bestätigen und so die Illusion einer trotz gesellschaftlicher Veränderungen, die als geringfügig abgetan werden, letzten Endes unantastbaren patriarchischen Gesellschaftsordnung zu kreieren.

In den frühen Superman-Comics genießt der Held seine eigenen Kräfte intuitiv und ungezügelt. Die Popularität dargestellter physischer Gewalt ist laut John Fiske auf die reale Erfahrung von Machtlosigkeit in einer hierarchischen Gesellschaft zurückzuführen – eine Theorie, die sich zur Erklärung der Beliebtheit ausgeprägter Gewaltdarstellungen während der Großen Depression anbietet. Zudem konnte die textliche Idealisierung impulsiver Körperlichkeit einerseits als puritanisch-reaktionäres Aufbegehren gegen den intellektuellen Elitismus der 20er Jahre, andererseits als karnevalesk-symbolische Zerstörung eines als inakzeptabel empfundenen Status Quo im Sinne Michail Bachtins verstanden werden.

Die Situation der Großen Depression verlangte nach grundlegenden gesellschaftlichen Veränderungen. Fiktionale Helden der Zeit trafen daher oft drastische Maßnahmen, um gesellschaftliche Probleme und Konflikte zu lösen. DCs Superhelden der Jahre 1938 bis 1941, allen voran Superman und Batman, sind keine gesetzes- und systemtreuen Ordnungshüter, sondern leidenschaftliche und oft gewalttätige Rebellen, die, wie die Handlung immer wieder bestätigt, von “höheren” Idealen geleitet werden. Sie kommen den Armen und Unterdrückten zu Hilfe und legen sich mit unzähligen Vertretern des Establishments an (Politiker, Polizisten, Gefängnisaufseher, Firmenchefs u.s.w.), die bestenfalls als irrig, schlechtestenfalls als korrupt und skrupellos porträtiert werden. Kleinkriminalität wird bis 1941 in vielen Fällen als Produkt einer ungerechten Gesellschaft beschrieben, und DCs Helden zeigen daher häufig Verständnis für die Probleme Kleinkrimineller.

Die im Laufe der Monate wachsende Macht Supermans verlangte nach einem (beinahe) ebenbürtigen Gegenspieler, und der 1939 eingeführte Ultra-Humanite sollte zur Vorlage für den genretypischen Super-Bösewicht werden. Im Gegensatz zu jenen Kleinkriminellen, die Superman durch Hilfeleistung reformiert, ist der Ultra-Humanite kein Opfer gesellschaftlicher Umstände, sondern "böse" aus freien Stücken. Held und Bösewicht repräsentieren moralische Gegenpole. Der "gute" Held wird mit physischer, der "böse" Erzschorke mit intellektueller Macht konnotiert – eine in der Populärkultur auch über die anti-intellektuelle Stimmung der 30er Jahre hinaus typische Konstellation. Der "gute" Held widmet sich selbstlos der Gemeinschaft, der "böse" Erzschorke ist von Selbstsucht und Egoismus getrieben. Die Tatsache, dass der generische Sieg des Helden über den Erzschorken niemals endgültig ist, kann einerseits auf die Anforderungen des Serienformats zurückgeführt werden, verweist andererseits aber auch auf den mythischen Charakter der Heldentat (s.u.). Die von konkreten sozialen Missständen losgelösten Erzschorken traten vermehrt ab 1940 auf, als Krieg und wirtschaftlicher Aufschwung soziale und innenpolitische Probleme in den Hintergrund drängten und die heldenhafte Auseinandersetzung mit sozialen Missständen folglich an Popularität einbüßte.

Claude Levi-Strauss beschreibt das (fiktionale) Überbrücken realer und als beängstigend empfundener kultureller Kontraste und Gegensätze als die zentrale Funktion des Mythos. Superman gewinnt mythischen Status, indem er außerordentliche semiotische Macht gewinnt, d.h. gegensätzliche Bedürfnisse und Bestrebungen seiner Zeit miteinander in Einklang bringt, die in der Realität nicht miteinander versöhnt werden können. Er verbindet patriarchisch-konservative mit subversiv-progressiven Interessen, die Sehnsucht nach individueller Anerkennung mit selbstloser Hingabe an die Gemeinschaft. Mit dem Bedürfnis nach Sicherheit und Harmonie wächst die Popularität mythischer Helden in unsicheren und konfliktreichen Zeiten, und die Popularität von Helden im Stile Supermans erreichte folglich ihren Höhepunkt während der Großen Depression und des Zweiten Weltkriegs.

Der Anteil subversiv-progressiver Elemente am frühen Superhelden-Konzept ist im Vergleich mit anderen populären Helden-Konzepten ungewöhnlich hoch. Ein Grund dafür ist in der während der Großen Depression weit verbreiteten und stark

ausgeprägten Unzufriedenheit mit dem Status Quo zu finden. Ein anderer liegt in der Tatsache, dass Comic-Hefte den Frustrationen und Ängsten sowie der Wut vieler in direkterer und unverblümterer Weise Ausdruck verleihen konnten als andere Medien, weil der Einfluss des kulturellen Establishments auf die junge Comic-Heft-Industrie noch gering war.

Die Angst vor dem Untergang des Individuums in der anonymen Menge war weit verbreitet in den zunehmend industrialisierten und urbanisierten Vereinigten Staaten der 30er Jahre. Hinzu kamen die existenzielle Bedrohung durch Massenarmut und ein weit verbreitetes Gefühl der Scham, das von persönlichen finanziellen Einbußen und dem damit verbundenen sozialen Abstieg ausgelöst wurde. Die Sehnsucht, sich von der Menge abzuheben und als Individuum Anerkennung zu finden, war folglich groß. Fiktional erfüllt wurde diese Sehnsucht vom bunt kostümierten, mit übermenschlichen Kräften ausgestatteten und von Lois Lane angehimmelten Superman. Bezeichnenderweise wird Superman in seiner Clark-Kent-Identität, mit der sich der Leser identifizieren konnte, von Lois Lane geringgeschätzt und sogar gedemütigt. Da Männlichkeit in westlich-kapitalistischen Gesellschaften mit Macht und Dominanz konnotiert wird, diente Superman besonders jungen männlichen Lesern als Machtfantasie, deren reale Macht noch eng begrenzt war, die aber bereits mit den Anforderungen des westlichen Männlichkeitsideals vertraut waren.

Der kommerzielle Erfolg der Superman-Geschichten ermutigte DC, mit Batman einen zweiten Superhelden auf den Markt zu bringen. Während Supermans übermenschliche Fähigkeiten durch seine außerirdische Herkunft erklärt werden, ist Batman ein zumindest theoretisch verwundbarer Mensch ohne wirkliche Superkräfte. Er widmet sein Leben der Verbrecherjagd und dem dazugehörigen Training, um die Ermordung seiner Eltern zu sühnen. Superman kann dementsprechend als Christus ähnlicher Erlöser verstanden werden, der buchstäblich vom Himmel gefallen ist. Batman dagegen ist ein Produkt urbaner Gewalt und verkörpert die Hoffnung darauf, dass die industrielle Gesellschaft sich aus eigener Kraft zu erlösen vermag.

Um so effektiv wie möglich zu sein, so die Logik der Handlung, muss Batman sich voll und ganz seiner Mission verschreiben und den Bereich des "Weiblichen" weit von sich

weisen. Während die (wenn auch unerfüllte) “Dreiecksbeziehung” zwischen Superman / Clark Kent und Lois Lane ein fester Bestandteil der Handlung ist, sind die Batman-Geschichten auf die Superhelden-Identität zugeschnitten, nicht auf das Alter Ego Bruce Wayne. In der Tradition des amerikanischen “Monomythos” (Lawrence und Jewett) kann Batman die Gemeinschaft nur dann (auf gewalttätige und undemokratische Weise) vor dem Verderben retten, wenn er dauerhaft über die weibliche Versuchung erhaben ist.

Die Figur des einsamen Rächers warf jedoch Probleme auf: Zum einen gab es für sie keinen Anlass, ihre Gedanken zu kommunizieren – ein erzähltechnisches Problem; zum anderen war sie für den Geschmack vieler junger Leser zu abgründig angelegt – ein Vermarktungsproblem. Die kommerziell äußerst erfolgreiche und im Laufe der Jahre vielfach nachgeahmte Lösung war die Einführung des jungen Sidekicks Robin. Robin hellte den Ton der Serie auf, diente Batman als Gesprächspartner und besonders dem jungen Leser als Identifikationsfigur. Zudem lenkt er Batman nicht von seiner Mission ab, da dessen Mission aufgrund ähnlicher Kindheitserlebnisse auch seine eigene ist. Die Partnerschaft zwischen Batman und Robin ist rein zielgerichtet; sie ist von der gemeinsamen Mission bestimmt, nicht von sexuellem (also störendem, s.o.) Begehren. Batman fungiert als Vaterfigur und Lehrer. Nicht durch sexuelle Vereinigung, sondern durch Ausbildung gelingt es dem Helden, sich selbst in Robin neu zu erschaffen. Diese Konstellation spiegelt sowohl die christlichen Wurzeln des Monomythos als auch die Hoffnungen wider, die an die rasant steigenden Schülerzahlen der 30er Jahre geknüpft waren.

Während Batman und Robin eine gerechtere und geordnetere Gesellschaft herbeiführen wollen, hat ihr populärster Gegenspieler, der Joker, das gegenteilige Ziel: Er will die Gesellschaft aller Ordnung berauben und ins Chaos stürzen. Als Figur repräsentiert er jene “weibliche” Seite der Identität, die der hypermaskuline Batman sich selbst nicht zugestehen will oder kann: Er schminkt sein Gesicht, trägt Lippenstift, spielt Geige, liebt Perlen und Diamanten. Batmans Kampf gegen den Joker dient somit nicht nur dem Ideal der gerechteren und geordneteren Gesellschaft, sondern auch der Bestätigung der eigenen hypermaskulinen Identität.

Viele weitere Superhelden-Serien wurden im Jahr 1940 gestartet, die meisten von ihnen eng an das Superman-Konzept angelehnt. Eine Ausnahmerecheinung war Will Eisners "The Spirit." Zum einen sicherte sich Eisner das Copyright an seinen Figuren und Geschichten; zum anderen wurde *The Spirit Section* (in dessen Rahmen "The Spirit" erschien) im Gegensatz zu fast allen anderen Comic-Heften der Zeit nicht eigenständig, sondern als Zeitungsbeilage vermarktet. Da der durchschnittliche Zeitungsleser wesentlich älter war als der durchschnittliche Comic-Heft-Leser, entwickelte Eisner Sprache (Seitenformat, Panelübergang u.s.w.) und Inhalt des Comics in eine für Erwachsene attraktivere Richtung.

Zwar zollte "The Spirit" dem kommerziellen Erfolg des Superhelden-Genres insofern Anerkennung, als der Held der Serie zumindest eine Augenmaske trägt; auch seine liberalen und humanitären Ideale ähneln denen vieler anderer früher Superhelden. Er fungiert als humaner Einfluss auf ein oft indifferentes und ungerechtes Justizsystem, hat jedoch keine übermenschlichen Fähigkeiten, trägt kein konventionelles Superhelden-Kostüm, lehnt Selbstjustiz prinzipiell ab und ist gar offiziell tot. Der Spirit repräsentiert ein Helden-Konzept, das nicht von intuitiv-exzessiver Gewaltanwendung geprägt ist, sondern moderate physische mit ebenfalls nicht unfehlbaren intellektuellen Fähigkeiten verbindet.

Während typische Superhelden-Serien der Zeit mit großem kommerziellen Erfolg die Machtfantasien männlicher Kinder und Jugendlicher bedienten (s.o.), spielten derartige textliche Funktionen in "The Spirit" lediglich eine untergeordnete Rolle. Im Gegensatz zum konventionellen Superhelden im Stile Supermans ist der Spirit erstens keine hypermaskuline Personifikation männlicher Machtfantasien und hat zweitens kein verletzliches Alter Ego im Stile Clark Kents, mit dem sich der junge Leser identifizieren könnte. "The Spirit" richtete sich an ältere Leser beiderlei Geschlechts, deren gesellschaftliche Etablierung bereits weiter fortgeschritten oder vollzogen war und für die jene Machtfantasien, die konventionelle Superhelden-Serien anboten, folglich weniger oder gar nicht relevant waren.

Viele erwachsene Zeitungsleser belächelten den kommerziellen Erfolg konventioneller Superhelden oder registrierten ihn gar mit Besorgnis (s. Kapitel 2). Eisner berücksichtigte

solche Empfindungen der Leser, indem er die Superhelden-Elemente seiner Geschichten mit einer ironischen Note versah – vor allem mit Hilfe seiner stilisierten, cartoonartigen Zeichnungen. Während der realistischere Zeichenstil der typischen Superhelden-Comics das Erscheinungsbild der physischen, sinnlich wahrnehmbaren Welt betont, schafft die abstraktere Cartoonzeichnung Distanz zu dieser physischen Welt. Der realistischere Zeichenstil bietet sich damit für Superhelden-Comics an, deren Wirkung auf Identifikation und körperlichen Machtfantasien beruht; der cartoonartigere Zeichenstil dagegen schafft Raum für intellektuelle Reflexion und Subversion und wurde in den 50er Jahren zum Markenzeichen der parodistischen Serie *Mad*, von den späten 60er Jahren an auch der Underground Comix.

Anschließend stellt Kapitel 3 zwei weitere DC-Superhelden im Stile Supermans vor. Flash und Green Lantern sind zwar im Gegensatz zu Superman nicht außerirdischer Abstammung, haben ihre übermenschlichen Fähigkeiten aber wie dieser zufällig und ohne eigenes Zutun erlangt (mussten sie sich also nicht wie Batman erarbeiten) und nutzen sie, um in einem korrupten und ausbeuterischen Amerika für mehr soziale Gerechtigkeit zu kämpfen. Ihre Ziele und Methoden werden wie die Supermans und Batmans niemals von Erzähler oder Handlung infrage gestellt. Green Lanterns Alter Ego arbeitet wie Clark Kent als Nachrichtenreporter, und es ergibt sich eine dem Lois-Lane-Handlungsstrang ähnliche “Dreiecksbeziehung.”

Die erfolgreichste der vielen neuen Superhelden-Serien war Fawcett's *Captain Marvel Adventures*, die eine ganze Reihe von Ablegerserien inspirieren sollte. Neben einem klaren und humorvollen Ton, der ein aussergewöhnlich breites Publikum ansprach, zeichnete *Captain Marvel Adventures* von Anfang an eine ideologische Tendenz aus, welche die Serie von den DC-Serien ihrer Zeit unterschied. Captain Marvel ist kein gewalttätiger Rebell, weil sein Amerika sozial gerecht ist und keine grundlegende Veränderung braucht. *Captain Marvel Adventures* war damit bereits Ausdruck eines veränderten, von wirtschaftlichem Aufschwung und Kriegsgefahr geprägten Zeitgeistes, eines neuen Verlangens nach der Illusion einer geschlossenen Heimatfront.

Dieses Verlangen kommt noch deutlicher in der MLJ-Serie *The Shield* zum Ausdruck, deren Held ein Kostüm trägt, das der amerikanischen Fahne nachempfunden ist. Vom

Erzähler als loyaler Patriot gefeiert, bekämpft der dem F.B.I. Chief J. Edgar Hoover direkt unterstellte Shield als verabscheuungswürdig porträtierte feindliche Soldaten, die vom Zeitpunkt der amerikanischen Kriegserklärung an klar als Soldaten der Achsenmächte identifiziert werden. In seinen gewalttätigen Methoden gleicht Shield den DC-Helden seiner Zeit. Sein Amerika ähnelt jedoch nicht dem Amerika der DC-Serien, sondern dem der *Captain Marvel Adventures*. Die amerikanische Gesellschaft wird als in ihren Strukturen gerecht und beschützenswert dargestellt, das Establishment wird idealisiert.

Der einzige Antiheld der frühen Geschichte des Comic-Hefts ist Marvels Sub-Mariner, der in der Unterwasserwelt von Atlantis aufgewachsen ist. Er ist von seiner Mutter dazu erzogen worden, Menschen zu fürchten und zu bekämpfen. Vor dem Hintergrund der tragischen Vergangenheit von Atlantis wird diese Perspektive als zugleich verständlich und fehlgeleitet dargestellt. Weiter kompliziert wird die Situation des Sub-Mariner dadurch, dass sein Vater ein Mensch ist. Diese konfliktreichen Umstände machen den Sub-Mariner zu einem innerlich zerrissenen, unausgeglichenen und für Menschen gefährlichen Charakter. Auf der anderen Seite wird er auch als mutig, selbstlos und edelmütig porträtiert. Als an ein älteres Publikum gerichteter Antiheld ist er seiner Zeit weit voraus; vergleichbare Figuren erschienen in größerer Zahl erst in den Comic-Heften der 60er Jahre.

Marvels Human Torch ist der einzige Androide unter den Superhelden seiner Zeit. Anfangs kann er seine übermenschlichen Fähigkeiten nicht kontrollieren und wird so zur Gefahr für die Menschen, denen er begegnet. Obwohl er diese Probleme schnell löst und die amerikanischen Gepflogenheiten bereitwillig annimmt, heben ihn sein unruhiges Temperament, seine Eitelkeit und sein nicht perfektes Urteilsvermögen von der absoluten moralischen Autorität des typischen Superhelden im Stile Supermans ab.

Chapter 4 / Kapitel 4

Als Superman und Batman sich von 1939 an zu Multimedia-Phänomenen entwickelten, wurden die Wurzeln ihrer Popularität, die Comic-Hefte, zunehmend auch von Erwachsenen zur Kenntnis genommen. Viele Erwachsene waren in Anbetracht der gewalttätigen und rebellischen Heldenfiguren besorgt oder gar schockiert. DC reagierte, indem der Verlag vereinzelt Mitteilungen in seine Comics einbaute, welche die Helden in ein erwachsenen Kritikern genehmeres Licht rücken sollten. Obwohl die Geschichten selbst zunächst weiterhin den Unterhaltungswert gewaltsamer Rebellion nutzten, richteten sich die Helden hier und da in von der eigentlichen Handlung losgelösten Ratschlägen an den Leser, vom Glücksspiel abzulassen, älteren Menschen über die Straße zu helfen, Sport zu treiben, sich gesund zu ernähren oder generell den Eltern zu gehorchen. Erwachsenen, die einen Blick in ein eigentlich für Kinder und Jugendliche bestimmtes Comic-Heft warfen, sollte der Eindruck vermittelt werden, Comic-Hefte seien der Autorität Erwachsener nicht ab- sondern zuträglich; sie seien "lehrreich" und "charakterbildend" im Sinne der Werte Erwachsener und in der Tradition konventioneller Kinderliteratur (die Erwachsene für ihre Kinder kauften und nach eigenen Kriterien auswählten), nicht Unterhaltung nach dem Geschmack junger Konsumenten. Auch die formale Nähe zum Zeitungsstrip wurde trotz wachsender Eigenständigkeit des Comic-Heft-Mediums hervorgehoben, um die zunehmende gesellschaftliche Akzeptanz des Zeitungsstrips für das Ansehen des in die Kritik geratenen Comic-Hefts nutzbar zu machen.

Es gelang DC jedoch nicht, aufgebrachte Kritiker auf diese Weise hinlänglich zu besänftigen. Die wachsende Gefahr eines Weltkriegs verstärkte das öffentliche Verlangen nach einer geschlossenen Heimatfront und folglich den Druck auf den Verlag, sich jenem Trend hin zu konservativeren Werten und Idealen anzupassen, der die amerikanische Medienlandschaft ergriffen hatte. DC stellte schließlich einen neuen Chefredakteur ein, der Mitte 1941 ein "beratendes" Gremium einsetzte. Dieses Gremium hielt alle Autoren und Zeichner des Verlags zu einer positiven Darstellung des amerikanischen Status Quo und einem Verzicht auf explizite Gewaltdarstellung an. Im Laufe des Jahres wurden die DC-Comics, von wenigen Ausnahmen abgesehen, diesen Vorgaben angepasst.

Superman und Batman wandeln sich von sozial engagierten Rebellen zu Super-Polizisten, die den Status Quo verteidigen. Sie leben nun in einem Amerika, dessen Institutionen und Machtstrukturen über jeden Zweifel erhaben sind. Korruption, soziale Ungerechtigkeit, Armut und Klassenkampf gehören der Vergangenheit an. Kleinkriminalität existiert noch, wird aber nicht mehr vor dem Hintergrund sozialer Ungerechtigkeit thematisiert, sondern zum Ausdruck angeborener und nicht korrigierbarer Niedertracht erklärt. Batman und Robin verkünden immer wieder, dass Verbrechen sich in Amerika nicht auszahlt. Jene Kleinkriminelle, die das nicht einsehen, werden nun von den Helden rücksichtslos bestraft, da sie keine Opfer sozialer Umstände sind und nicht reformiert werden können.

Die Rolle Lois Lanes musste im Gegensatz zu der Supermans und Batmans nicht umdefiniert werden, um den neuen redaktionellen Vorgaben zu entsprechen. Immer wieder erweist sich, dass die beruflich ambitionierte Lois von der männlich dominierten Welt bezahlter Arbeit überfordert und auf Supermans (männliche) Hilfe angewiesen ist. Diese fiktive Konstellation konnte der Leser als Rechtfertigung dafür verstehen, dass Frauen in der amerikanischen Realität trotz ihrer Verdienste um Kriegsproduktion und wirtschaftlichen Aufschwung weiterhin am Arbeitsplatz diskriminiert wurden und keine Verbesserung ihrer rechtlichen Situation erfuhren. Doch obwohl der Text den feministischen Diskurs diskreditiert und ein Lesen im Sinne patriarchischer Interessen nahelegt, verweist die schiere Existenz des feministischen Diskurses darauf, dass der patriarchische Status Quo keine Selbstverständlichkeit mehr war, sondern der Rechtfertigung bedurfte.

Während Superman und Batman zu Zeiten der Große Depression gefühlsbeherrscht agierten und ihren Super-Kräften freien Lauf ließen, legen sie während der Kriegsjahre ein höheres Maß an Rationalität und Disziplin an den Tag. Sie töten nicht mehr, retten gelegentlich sogar das Leben ihrer Gegner. Sie legen für ihre Machtausübung eine Grenze fest, die sie nicht überschreiten. Die Kombination aus körperlicher Kraft und Zurückhaltung bzw. Disziplin, die beide Helden nun auszeichnet, findet symbolischen Ausdruck in ihren kraftvollen und doch klar definierten Körpern. Sie korreliert laut John Fiske mit dem westlichen Konzept von Männlichkeit: Das Privileg männlicher Autorität und Macht werde durch Zuverlässigkeit und Pflichtbewusstsein "erkauft." In

Kriegszeiten diente die Beanspruchung der durch Superman und Batman verkörperten Disziplin und Rationalität für “uns” (und gegen “sie”) darüber hinaus der Propaganda, da sie den eigenen Kriegsanstrengungen eine Aura der Legitimität verlieh. Den typischen Erzfeind im Stile des Ultra-Humanite zeichnet dagegen ein Mangel an körperlichen Fähigkeiten und an Bescheidenheit aus – ein Mangel an “Männlichkeit,” der ihn zum symbolischen Feind der (mit Männlichkeit konnotierten) Kriegsanstrengungen macht.

Die Produzenten von Populärkultur wurden von der amerikanischen Regierung dazu aufgefordert, sich an dem Kriegspropagandamonolog zu beteiligen. Während explizite Propaganda in den Superman- und Batman-Heften weitgehend auf Titelbilder und das gelegentliche heldenhafte Aufspüren von Naziagenten beschränkt blieb, prägte sie die DC-Serie *All Star Comics* nachhaltiger. Die Helden der Serie, sonst als Justice Society of America bekannt, nennen sich nun Justice Battalion of America und ziehen in den Krieg. Dort sind die Rollen klar verteilt: Amerikanische Soldaten werden nicht nur als “gut,” sondern auch als körperlich und geistig überlegen porträtiert; äußerliche and sprachliche Merkmale deutscher und japanischer Soldaten gelten als zuverlässige und unveränderliche Anzeichen von Niedertracht und Unterlegenheit. Amerikaner deutscher und japanischer Abstammung werden dagegen von den Helden vor rassistischen Anfeindungen geschützt, was vor dem Hintergrund der damaligen innenpolitischen und sozialen Realität keine Selbstverständlichkeit war. Um die propagandawirksame Illusion von einer gerechten, harmonischen und konfliktfreien amerikanischen Gesellschaft in der Tradition des amerikanischen Monomythos (Lawrence und Jewett) aufrechterhalten zu können, werden inneramerikanische Konflikte wie rassistische Übergriffe und Demonstrationen für bessere Arbeitsbedingungen stets als von intriganten Naziagenten initiiert dargestellt.

Noch deutlicher verkörpert Marvels Captain America den militanten Patriotismus der Zeit. Als Steve Rogers aus patriotischer Überzeugung in die Armee eintreten will, wird er wegen körperlicher Defizite ausgemustert. Er lässt sich daraufhin von Regierungsbeamten ein Serum spritzen, das seine körperlichen und geistigen Fähigkeiten erheblich steigert und ihn in den Super-Soldaten Captain America verwandelt. Wie Shield trägt er ein der amerikanischen Fahne nachempfundenes Kostüm, doch im

Gegensatz zu diesem bekämpft er bereits Monate vor dem amerikanischen Kriegseintritt Feinde, die eindeutig als die Achsenmächte identifiziert werden können.

Als einflussreichster Aspekt der Serie *Captain America Comics* sollten sich allerdings ihre formalen Innovationen erweisen. Zeichner Jack Kirby revolutionierte die visuelle Sprache des Mediums, indem er Layout und Panelform eigene Ausdruckskraft verlieh, Figuren die Panelgrenzen durchbrechen ließ und sie aus wechselnder Perspektive abbildete, die Distanz zum Leser verringerte. Der männliche Körper wurde zelebriert und erotisiert, seine öffentliche Darbietung in einer Weise zur Schau gestellt, die zum Standard maskuliner Erzählstrukturen werden sollte. Diesem Zelebrieren des männlichen Körpers konnten und können, so die These, sowohl patriarchisch-konservative als auch karnevalesk-subversive Diskurse zugeschrieben werden.

Marvels frühe Comics hingegen eigneten sich nicht zu Zwecken der Kriegspropaganda. Kein anderer Comicheld musste so radikal undefiniert werden wie der Sub-Mariner, um dem öffentlichen Verlangen nach einer geschlossenen Heimatfront gerecht zu werden. Ursprünglich als zwiespältige, tragisch fehlgeleitete und der Menschheit feindlich gesinnte Figur angelegt, wird er plötzlich und ohne erzählerische Erklärung zum eindimensionalen amerikanischen Patrioten, der voller Begeisterung an der Seite seines ehemaligen Feindes Human Torch die amerikanischen Kriegsanstrengungen unterstützt. Von 1943 an wurde das Thema Krieg allerdings tendenziell aus Comics und anderen Produkten der amerikanischen Populärkultur verdrängt, da die Konsumenten sich zunehmend nach realitätsferner Ablenkung vom Krieg sehnten. Im Superhelden-Genre ersetzen überlebensgroße Erzschorken allmählich feindliche Soldaten und Agenten. Die Konflikte zwischen Helden und Schurken sind zunehmend von spielerischer Rivalität gekennzeichnet, ihre Darstellung ist in geringerem Maß von Gewalt geprägt und nimmt komödienhafte Züge an.

Einer der ungewöhnlichsten Superhelden der Kriegsjahre ist Plastic Man, dessen elastischer Körper jede beliebige Form annehmen kann und sich damit grundlegend vom klar definierten Körper des typischen Superhelden unterscheidet. Während der hypermaskuline Körper des typischen Superhelden seine innere, vom Text mit Weiblichkeit konnotierte Verletzlichkeit verbirgt, schreckt Plastic Man nicht davor

zurück, weibliche Gestalt anzunehmen (und seinem männlichen Sidekick Woozy einen Kuss zu geben). Seine übermenschlichen Fähigkeiten nutzt er auf eine Weise, die im Vergleich mit typischen Superhelden geradezu sanft anmutet. Die Frauen, denen Plastic Man begegnet, sind selbständig und bedürfen im Gegensatz zur von Lois Lane geprägten Genrenorm keinerlei männlicher Hilfe. Die sich um diese ungewöhnlich definierten Geschlechterrollen rankenden Geschichten der Serie "Plastic Man" parodieren das besonders zu Kriegszeiten populäre, hypermaskuline Männlichkeitsideal und untergraben den mit diesem Ideal verknüpften Anspruch auf den Erhalt patriarchischer Gesellschaftsstrukturen.

Nicht nur die klare Trennlinie zwischen Männlichkeit und Weiblichkeit, sondern auch die zu Kriegszeiten noch häufiger propagierte zwischen den moralischen Kategorien "gut" und "böse" wird von "Plastic Man" verwischt. Sowohl der Held als auch sein Sidekick Woozy haben eine kriminelle Vergangenheit, und Woozy ist noch immer nicht gänzlich gegen kleinkriminelle Anwandlungen gefeit. Auch das Amerika, in dem Plastic Man lebt, ist nicht frei von gesellschaftlichen Missständen und passt damit nicht in die Schablone des "Guten." Die Gegenspieler des Helden mögen zunächst den Anschein genretypischer Erzschorken erwecken, erweisen sich aber meist als Opfer gesellschaftlicher Umstände, manchmal gar als missverstandene, eigentlich gutherzige Außenseiter. Die Dämonisierung feindlicher Soldaten, ein zentraler Bestandteil des Propagandamonologs und der Populärkultur der Zeit, wird parodiert. Kurz gesagt, "Plastic Man" ist eines der wenigen Kulturprodukte der frühen 40er Jahre, das sich dem Propagandamonolog weitgehend verweigert. Der Zeichenstil, der sich für den Ausdruck solch subversiver Konzepte anbietet, ist der cartoonartig entfremdete Stil.

Eine weitere Ausnahmerecheinung ist DCs Wonder Woman, die populärste weibliche Superheldenfigur der frühen Geschichte des Comic-Hefts. Trotz redaktioneller Vorschriften, die auf eine idealisierende Darstellung des Status Quo pochten, begegnet die Heldin immer wieder sozialer Ungerechtigkeit und tritt ihr entgegen. Die Tatsache, dass dies bei DC möglich war, hat vermutlich mit dem Umstand zu tun, dass der Autor von *Wonder Woman* auch Mitglied des redaktionellen Kontrollgremiums war. Wonder Woman vereint traditionell weibliche Eigenschaften wie Empfindsamkeit, Warmherzigkeit und Geselligkeit mit traditionell männlichen wie Macht, Stärke und

Selbstvertrauen. Während typische männliche Superhelden erhabene und relativ unnahbare Figuren sind, die ihre Abenteuer allein oder in Begleitung eines ihnen untergebenen Sidekicks bestehen, fühlt Wonder Woman sich in der Gesellschaft ihrer Freundinnen wohl. Sie behandelt diese Freundinnen als Gleichgestellte und ist oft auf ihre Hilfe angewiesen. Heldentum, so die humanistische Botschaft, ist nicht auf überlebensgroße Superhelden beschränkt.

Wonder Woman trägt freiwillig Armreifen, die ihr ein exzessives Nutzen ihrer übermenschlichen Kräfte unmöglich machen. Disziplin und Zurückhaltung, in konventionellen Superhelden-Geschichten ab 1941 als männliche Charakteristika definiert, werden so dem Bereich der Weiblichkeit zugeschrieben, während exzessive Gewalt, die in der Grausamkeit des Zweiten Weltkriegs Ausdruck findet, mit Hyper-Maskulinität konnotiert wird, d.h. mit dem Fehlen weiblichen Einflusses. Diese Definition der Geschlechterrollen ficht nicht nur das westliche Konzept von Männlichkeit, sondern auch den auf ihm beruhenden männlichen Herrschaftsanspruch an.

Chapter 5 / Kapitel 5

Die während der Großen Depression und des Zweiten Weltkriegs weit verbreiteten Gefühle der Ohnmacht und Machtlosigkeit hatten entscheidend zur Popularität von Machtfantasien und damit zum kommerziellen Erfolg des Superhelden-Genres beigetragen. Gewonnener Krieg und wirtschaftlicher Aufschwung sorgten jedoch für eine optimistischere Stimmungslage und drohten, den Superhelden-Comics ihren Nährboden zu entziehen: Amerika schien sich auch ohne die Hilfe überlebensgroßer Heldenfiguren auf dem Weg in eine bessere Zukunft zu befinden. Zudem wuchs mit den Schülerzahlen das Interesse an den sozialen Aspekten des High-School-Milieus, an seinen zwischenmenschlichen Ritualen und zunehmend hedonistischen Werten. Konventionelle Superhelden-Comics konnten dieses Interesse nicht befriedigen, da ihre Protagonisten den Bereich zwischenmenschlicher Nähe ihrer heldenhaften Mission opfern.

Die meisten Verlage versuchten, ihren Superhelden neue Aufgabenbereiche sowohl in bunten Fantasiewelten als auch in der neu strukturierten Nachkriegswelt zu erschließen. Wenn sie nicht gerade in Fantasiewelten unterwegs sind, bevölkern Superman & Co. nun Städte, welche die neue Weltmacht Amerika in idealisierter Form repräsentieren. Die Helden selbst verkörpern das Establishment und agieren so verantwortungsvoll, wie es von den Entscheidungsträgern einer Weltmacht zu wünschen ist. Der Gedanke, daß eine Weltmacht einer mit undemokratischer Machtfülle (bzw. mit Superkräften) ausgestatteten Führung bedarf, um ihrer Verantwortung gerecht werden zu können, weist voraus auf den politischen Machtmissbrauch und die Kommunistenjagd des Kalten Kriegs. Ausnahmen stellen weiterhin die Serien "The Spirit" und "Plastic Man" dar, deren nicht immer heldenhafte Protagonisten auch im Nachkriegsamerika mit Inkompetenz, Korruption und sozialer Ungerechtigkeit konfrontiert werden.

Die Verkaufszahlen der Superhelden-Comics brachen trotz aller Rettungsversuche in der zweiten Hälfte der 40er Jahre ein. Der Gesamtumsatz der Comic-Heft-Industrie verdoppelte sich allerdings von 1947 bis 1949 und wuchs auch in den folgenden Jahren weiter an. Mit einem erweiterten Angebot, das eine Vielzahl unterschiedlicher Genres umfasste, konnten vor allem weibliche, jugendliche und junge erwachsene Leser hinzugewonnen werden. Teen-Comics erfreuten sich besonders bei jungen Mädchen

Beliebtheit, die neugierig auf jenes High-School-Milieu waren, dem sie bald angehören würden und das neuerdings in Zeitschriften wie *Calling All Girls* und *Seventeen* als die faszinierende Welt der “Teenager” vermarktet wurde. Diese Welt wurde von Teen-Comics als Weiterführung der den jungen Lesern vertrauten Spiele und Rivalitäten dargestellt, niemals als befremdlich oder gar beäuschend. Themen wie Sexualität oder Kriminalität wurden ausgeklammert.

Heirat im Alter zwischen 18 und 24 wurde im Nachkriegsamerika zur Norm. Teenager sahen sich gezwungen, das von ihnen bei einem Date erwartete, geschlechtsspezifisch festgelegte Verhalten bereits in jungen Jahren zu erlernen. Da die meisten Eltern dieser Teenager wenig oder gar keine Erfahrung mit der Praxis des Datings hatten, suchten besonders weibliche Jugendliche, die dem sozialen Druck der frühen Heirat noch stärker ausgesetzt waren als männliche, Rat in an sie gerichteten kommerziellen Lehrfilmen oder Zeitschriften. Auch Romance-Comics versprachen ab 1947, die für ein “erfolgreiches” Date bzw. eine “erfolgreiche” Heirat notwendigen Informationen in unterhaltsamer Form zu vermitteln. Fast ausschließlich von Männern verfasst, beschreiben konventionelle Romance-Comics das Festhalten an traditionellen Geschlechterrollen als Schlüssel zum Erfolg. In einer typischen Geschichte des Genres hat die weibliche Protagonistin aus den “Fehlern” ihrer allzu übermütigen Vergangenheit gelernt, dass Initiative und Unabhängigkeit männliche Privilegien, Passivität und sexuelle Enthaltensamkeit vor der Ehe dagegen weibliche Pflichten sind. Wahres und anhaltendes Glück, so die Logik der Handlung, kann die Frau nur in der Häuslichkeit der traditionellen Ehe finden. Das männliche Vorrecht auf bezahlte Arbeit (und damit auf wirtschaftliche und politische Macht) bleibt unangetastet. Derart regressive Handlungsmuster waren für viele weibliche Leser der Nachkriegszeit attraktiv, weil sie den Rückzug der Frau aus der Berufstätigkeit als natürliche und wünschenswerte Entwicklung darstellten, nicht als Grund zur Besorgnis. Romance-Comics repräsentierten von 1949 bis zu den späten 50er Jahren das kommerziell erfolgreichste Genre des Comic-Heft-Markts.

Auch Western-Comics erfreuten sich in der ersten Hälfte der 50er Jahre, als in den Vereinigten Staaten die Angst vor kommunistischer Unterwanderung ihren Höhepunkt erreichte, großer Beliebtheit. Viele Amerikaner sehnten sich nach einer klar und

unveränderlich definierten, gegenüber der gefühlten Bedrohung kommunistischen Einflusses resistenten nationalen Identität. Der Mythos des Alten Westens lieferte ein fiktives, historisch verklärtes Fundament für eine solch unantastbare Identität. Darüber hinaus verfügt der heldenhafte Cowboy im Stile eines Roy Rogers ein ausgeprägtes Gespür für den Bereich der Natur, und dieser Bereich beinhaltet laut Western menschliche Wesensart. Ein solches Gespür für Menschen und ihre Überzeugungen war eine gefragte Fähigkeit, als im Zuge der Kommunistenjagd viele zwischenmenschliche Beziehungen von Misstrauen und Angst geprägt waren.

Jungle-Comics, ein weiteres erfolgreiches Genre des Nachkriegszeit, porträtieren die Einwohner exotischer, vorindustrieller Länder entweder als tierähnlich und gefährlich oder als kindlich naiv und schutzbedürftig. In beiden Fällen haben westliche Mächte das Recht und sogar die moralische Pflicht, diese Länder unter ihre Kontrolle zu bringen – eine Konstellation, die als Rechtfertigung erweiterter amerikanischer Kolonialambitionen gelesen werden konnte.

Die Mehrheit der Nachkriegs-Comics feierte die Unerschütterlichkeit traditioneller amerikanischer Werte und/oder propagierte die weltweite Verbreitung des “American Way of Life.” Dies war einerseits Ausdruck von Nationalstolz und Optimismus vor dem Hintergrund des gewonnenen Kriegs und des wirtschaftlichen Aufschwungs, kann andererseits aber auch als nervös-defensive Reaktion auf die Sorgen und Ungewissheiten der Zeit gedeutet werden: auf die Angst vor kommunistischer Weltherrschaft, einem Atomkrieg, Kriminalität, “Werteverfall,” steigenden Scheidungsraten, dem Untergang des patriarchischen Status Quo und der traditionellen Familie. Während des Kriegs hatten Frauen bewiesen, dass sie die bis dahin von Männern besetzten Arbeitsplätze ausfüllen konnten. Unmittelbar nach dem Krieg waren die Heiratsraten in die Höhe geschneilt, und viele Frauen waren zu ihrer traditionellen Rolle als Hausfrau und Mutter zurückgekehrt. Von 1948 an stieg die Zahl berufstätiger Frauen (und Mütter) zur Beunruhigung vieler Männer aber wieder an.

Die meisten Comics reagierten auf solche Ängste, indem sie die Illusion eines unantastbaren “American Way of Life” beschworen, doch die Comics des Crime-Genres, hauptsächlich von männlichen Erwachsenen gelesen, widmeten sich diesen Ängsten in

direkterer Form. Die Gesellschaft, die sie abbilden, befindet sich im Aufruhr. Kriminelle lassen es sich auf Kosten rechtschaffener Bürger gut gehen. Frauen weigern sich, die Grenzen ihrer traditionellen Rolle als Hausfrau und Mutter zu akzeptieren, machen Männern das Privileg wirtschaftlicher Macht streitig. Zwar wird weibliche Unzufriedenheit mit der traditionellen Rolle der Frau stets mit Geldgier und kriminellen Impulsen gleichgesetzt und meist vom Handlungsverlauf mit dem Tod bestraft, doch die Popularität solcher Frauenfiguren verweist auf die Angst der überwiegend männlichen Leser vor dem Verlust patriarchischer Privilegien.

Chapter 6 / Kapitel 6

Bisher hatte die Comic-Heft-Industrie zumindest oberflächlich den Anschein zu erwecken versucht, die Sorgen und Einwände von Gegnern des Mediums ernst zu nehmen und auf sie zu reagieren. Sogar die Produzenten von Crime-Comics hatten Kritiker zu besänftigen versucht, indem sie zum Abschluss jeder Geschichte verkündeten: "Crime does not pay." Veröffentlichte Leserbriefe zweifelhafter Authentizität hatten davon berichtet, dass Kriminelle durch die Lektüre von Crime-Comics zu einem rechtschaffenen Lebenswandel bekehrt worden seien.

Der Verlag EC weigerte sich dagegen zwischen 1950 und 1954 nicht nur, solche oder ähnliche Zugeständnisse zu machen, sondern zog erstmals die Beweggründe der Kritiker und die Berechtigung ihrer Vorwürfe in Zweifel. Einige Geschichten ECs decken die den moralischen und ästhetischen Einwänden zugrunde liegenden Machtdiskurse auf und machen sich über den heuchlerischen, eigene Interessen überdeckenden Ton der Anfeindungen lustig. Die Regeln des "guten Geschmacks" werden besonders von den expliziten Gewaltdarstellungen in ECs Horror-Comics bewusst verletzt, und diese Missachtung des "guten Geschmacks" wird als Quelle trotzigen Vergnügens schamlos zelebriert. Das Grauensvolle und "Anstößige" steht (ähnlich wie in Bachtins Karneval) im Dienste eines Humors, der den kulturellen Status Quo herausfordert.

ECs sogenannte "New Trend"-Comics richten sich aber nicht nur gegen die Argumente der Comic-Heft-Kritiker und des kulturellen Establishments, sondern allgemeiner gegen die selbstgerechte Idealisierung amerikanischer Institutionen zu Zeiten des McCarthyismus. Politik, Militär und Strafverfolgung sind in den EC-Comics nicht frei von Inkompetenz, Korruption und Diskriminierung. Konventionelle Crime-Comics hatten eine klare Grenze zwischen "uns" und "ihnen" gezogen, zwischen rechtschaffenen Bürgern und der kriminellen Unterwelt. ECs "New Trend"-Comics bestehen dagegen darauf, dass Gier, Böswilligkeit, Ignoranz und Verbrechen nicht immer den "anderen" (je nach Genre: Unterschicht, Kommunisten, Außerirdische usw.) in die Schuhe geschoben werden können, sondern auch ihren Platz in der traditionellen Familie und im Mittelstand der damals rasant wachsenden Vororte haben.

Im Jahr 1952 brachte EC einen Titel heraus, der sich noch grundlegender von der Kulturlandschaft der Zeit abhob: *Mad*. Konventionelle Comic-Hefte waren auf Identifikation mit dem Helden und auf emotionale Anteilnahme des Lesers angelegt. Reflexive Elemente waren folglich selten und untergruben niemals die Regeln des Genres oder den Bann der Illusion. Ausnahmeerscheinungen wie "The Spirit," "Plastic Man" und *Wonder Woman* hatten reflexive und intertextuelle Elemente eingesetzt, um die Grenzen des Superhelden-Genres zu erweitern; auch sie hatten aber die Grundbedingungen des Genres akzeptiert, um unter seinem Dach vermarktet werden zu können. Subversive Reflexivität und Intertextualität sind dagegen für *Mad* von so zentraler Bedeutung, dass generischer Realismus keine Rolle mehr spielt. Die Serie parodierte und verhöhnte zunächst andere Comics und Genres (viele EC-Leser waren mit Comics aufgewachsen und vertraut, von denen sie sich nun distanzieren wollten) und machte schließlich vor keinem Aspekt amerikanischer Gesellschaft mehr Halt – ein einzigartiger Fall sozialen Ungehorsams in der Kulturlandschaft der frühen 50er Jahre.

Mehrere Jahre vor dem kommerziellen Durchbruch der Jugendkultur wurden *Mad* und die anderen EC-Comics zum symbolischen Eigentum junger Amerikaner, die ihre Unzufriedenheit mit den repressiven Gesellschaftsstrukturen und dem konservativen kulturellen Klima ihrer Zeit zum Ausdruck bringen wollten. Zu einer Zeit, in der liberale und humanistische Ideale dem Verdacht kommunistischer Staatsgefährdung ausgesetzt waren, nahmen allerdings die meisten Erwachsenen die EC-Comics als dreisten und unakzeptablen Angriff auf den "American Way of Life" wahr. Das Bedürfnis nach einer alternativen Gemeinschaft war unter den EC-Lesern folglich groß. Der Verlag bediente es, indem er die Möglichkeit einer kumpelhaften Beziehung zwischen den Lesern und den Autoren und Zeichnern seiner Comics suggerierte.

Selbstporträts von Comic-Schöpfern in Comic-Heften waren bis dahin selten gewesen. Einerseits hätten sie den beabsichtigten Bann der Illusion gebrochen; andererseits hatten es viele Angestellte der Comic-Heft-Industrie vermieden, öffentlich mit ihrem geringgeschätzten Beruf in Verbindung gebracht zu werden. EC-Leser dagegen suchten keine intakte Fantasiewelt, sondern ein Produkt, das ihrer Entfremdung vom Mainstream und seiner narkotisierenden Kultur gerecht wurde. Die Situation der EC-Autoren und – Zeichner unterschied sich ebenfalls grundlegend von der ihrer Kollegen und Vorgänger,

denn sie wurden wesentlich besser bezahlt, konnten sich in höherem Maß kreativ entfalten und scheuten daher nicht davor zurück, sich auch öffentlich mit ihrer Arbeit zu identifizieren. Es gab also keinen Grund, dem Bedürfnis vieler Leser nach einem Blick hinter die Kulissen des Verlags nicht nachzukommen.

Das Bild, das ECs Angestellte von sich und ihrer Arbeit zeichneten, war das einer schrulligen, aber glücklichen Familie, die sich voller Begeisterung ihrer Kreativität widmet. Der Leser wurde in humorvoll-kumpelhaftem Ton eingeladen, sich dieser alternativen Familie virtuell anzuschließen, ein Insider bzw. Fan zu werden, d.h. die "EC-Familie" durch das Kaufen und Lesen möglichst vieler Comics besser kennenzulernen. Im Gegensatz zum damaligen Ideal der streng hierarchischen Familie, in der Kinder keinen oder wenig Einfluss auf die Entscheidungen der Eltern haben, ermutigte die demokratischere "EC-Familie" die Leser zur Einflussnahme auf den Produktionsprozess durch Leserbriefe.

Während "semiotische" und "ausdrückende" ("enunciative") Fanproduktivität schon immer zentrale Aspekte der Comic-Heft-Rezeption waren, regte EC jene "textuelle" Fanproduktivität (Konzepte von John Fiske) an, die für das Entstehen einer überregionalen Fangemeinschaft notwendig ist. Dies gelang zunächst durch das Einrichten einer Rubrik für Leserbriefe. Die Redakteure gingen in dieser Rubrik nicht nur in humorvoll-kumpelhafter Art auf die Briefe ein, sondern schrieben ihnen auch beratende Funktion zu. Der Gedanke, dass Autoren Texte in Kooperation mit Lesern herstellen, wurde und wird mitgetragen von der Sprache des Comic-Heft-Mediums, die auf einen im Vergleich mit anderen Medien relativ produktiven Rezipienten angewiesen ist, auf einen Rezipienten, der den vom Autor vorgegebenen statischen Panelgehalt selbst zu einer sinnvollen narrativen Einheit zusammenfügt. Vor dem Hintergrund einer Kulturlandschaft, die in den frühen 50er Jahren noch weitestgehend von älteren Erwachsenen bestimmt wurde und die Interessen und Werte der jüngeren Generation an den Rand drängte oder gar ignorierte, war das Gefühl der Einflussnahme auf ein Kulturprodukt für junge EC Leser besonders attraktiv. Es beinhaltete die Hoffnung, irgendwann auch jene soziale und politische Realität beeinflussen und verändern zu können, die von der überwältigenden Mehrheit der Kulturprodukte der Zeit als alternativlos dargestellt wurde.

Das Gemeinschaftsgefühl unter den EC-Lesern wurde gestärkt, als der Verlag im Jahr 1953 in all seinen Serien die Gründung eines nationalen Fanclubs verkündete. Die sich dadurch ergebenden Möglichkeiten gegenseitiger Kontaktaufnahme wurden von Fans genutzt, deren textuelle Produktivität die Grenzen der Rubrik für Leserbriefe sprengte. Fanzines konnten nun an Gleichgesinnte verschickt werden, und es erschien eine Vielzahl sogenannter EC Fanzines – ein Novum in der Geschichte der Comic-Heft-Rezeption. Popularität und Einfluss (auf Leser und andere Verlage) der politisch und kulturell subversiven EC-Comics wurden besonders von Erwachsenen des Mittelstands und der Oberschicht mit zunehmender Sorge zur Kenntnis genommen, da sie Hinweise auf Unzufriedenheit mit dem politischen und kulturellen Status Quo besonders unter jungen Amerikanern waren.

Chapter 7 / Kapitel 7

Die 50er Jahre waren in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika trotz wirtschaftlichen Wachstums eine Zeit sozialer Spannungen. Gesellschaftliche Privilegien, die jahrhundertlang als Selbstverständlichkeit betrachtet worden waren, gerieten in Gefahr. Barrieren zwischen Klassen, Rassen, Geschlechtern und Generationen büßten einen Teil ihrer Wirksamkeit ein. Zum Ende des Jahrzehnts gingen mehr als 90% aller Amerikaner im High-School-Alter zur Schule, wo der kulturelle Austausch über traditionelle Klassen-, Rassen- und Geschlechtergrenzen hinweg zunahm. Elterliche Kontrolle über ihre Kinder ließ nach, auch aufgrund steigender Zahlen berufstätiger Mütter. Immer mehr Jugendliche verdienten durch Teilzeitarbeit ihr eigenes Geld, wurden zu selbständigeren Konsumenten und damit zu einer zunehmend attraktiven Zielgruppe für die Industrie.

Grundlegender gesellschaftlicher Wandel zeichnete sich in den frühen 50er Jahren ab, und das Unbehagen vieler darüber wurde verstärkt durch die Spannungen des Kalten Kriegs, die ein Bedürfnis nach gefestigten Machtstrukturen weckten. Die Versuche der Mittel- und Oberklasse, die sich abzeichnenden gesellschaftlichen Umschichtungen abzuwenden, konzentrierten sich auf die Vorboten der Zukunft, Kinder und Jugendliche. Als Vertreter der sogenannten Baby-Boom-Generation waren die Kinder der frühen 50er Jahre dazu bestimmt, das Schicksal der Nation in nicht allzu ferner Zukunft zu lenken. Es wurde der Versuch unternommen, diesen Kindern allen gegenläufigen Entwicklungen zum Trotz traditionelle, dem Establishment genehme Werte und Verhaltensweisen aufzuzwingen. Als Rechtfertigung drastischer Maßnahmen dienten die Aussagen politischer Demagogen und die Darstellungen einer noch überwiegend an Erwachsene gerichteten Medienlandschaft, die von moralischer Entrüstung ("moral panic") über kommunistische Untergrabung und Jugendkriminalität ergriffen war.

Vor dem kommerziellen Durchbruch des Rock 'n' Roll repräsentierten Comic-Hefte in den Augen vieler Erwachsener das noch junge Phänomen der Jugendkultur und damit einen kulturellen Bereich, den es unter Kontrolle zu bringen galt. Comic-Heft-Kritiker machten sich die Welle moralischer Entrüstung über Jugendkriminalität zunutze, indem sie behaupteten, diese sei in erheblichem Maß auf den Konsum von Comic-Heften zurückzuführen. Diese Strategie wurde gewählt, weil sie nicht nur einen

wirkungsvolleren Angriff auf das Comic-Heft-Medium ermöglichte, sondern auch von möglichen anderen Ursachen für Jugendkriminalität ablenkte, deren Diskussion nicht im Sinne des Establishments war. Anfang 1954 verlieh Fredric Werthams viel zitiertes Buch *Seduction of the Innocent* der Behauptung, Comic-Hefte seien für Jugendkriminalität (mit)verantwortlich, eine wissenschaftliche Aura und half, die politische Linke für den Kampf gegen das Medium zu mobilisieren.

Kurz darauf wandte sich der seit 1953 aktive Unterausschuss des Senats zur Untersuchung von Jugendkriminalität dem Comic-Heft-Medium zu. Kritiker aus dem linken und rechten politischen Lager waren nun in ihrer Ablehnung des Mediums vereint. Die Senatoren nutzten die im Fernsehen hohe Einschaltquoten erzielenden Anhörungen, um sich vor einem Millionenpublikum als Verfechter der Interessen und Werte Erwachsener zu profilieren. Nicht zufällig galt ihr Hauptaugenmerk den von EC veröffentlichten Comics, die sich den Forderungen erwachsener Kritiker in besonders kompromissloser Weise widersetzt hatten. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen, die dem angeblichen Zusammenhang zwischen Comic-Heften und Jugendkriminalität widersprachen, wurden ebenso ignoriert wie offensichtliche Mängel in den Argumentationen der Kritiker. Abschließend forderten die Senatoren trotz fehlender Beweise für einen Zusammenhang zwischen Comic-Heften und Jugendkriminalität die Comic-Heft-Industrie dazu auf, sich selbst ein dem Film Production Code von 1934 nachempfundes Regelwerk aufzuerlegen.

Die Comic-Heft-Industrie beugte sich dem öffentlichen Druck und verkündete im September 1954 die Gründung der Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA), die wenig später den Comics Code veröffentlichte. Comic-Hefte, die den Anforderungen des Codes entsprachen, erhielten von der CMAA ein "Siegel der Anerkennung." Einige der zentralen Anforderungen waren eine ausschließlich positive Darstellung etablierter Institutionen und des Status Quo, der Verzicht auf eine realistische Thematisierung der Bereiche Sexualität und Jugendkultur sowie der Verzicht auf fast alle Requisiten des Horror-Genres. Auf Jugendkriminalitätsraten sollte die Einführung des Comics Codes freilich keinerlei Einfluss haben.

Besorgten Erwachsenen der Mittel- und Oberklasse wurde der Eindruck vermittelt, dass sie die Kultur der Kinder und Jugendlichen nach wie vor (oder zumindest wieder) unter Kontrolle hatten und dass diese Kultur dementsprechend darauf angelegt war, den Status Quo zu stärken. Die CMAA verinnerlichte die bis zur Einführung des Codes unzutreffende Behauptung der Kritiker, das Comic-Heft-Medium sei ausschließlich für Kinder bestimmt, und opferte jene Komplexität, Themen, Genres, Serien und Verlage, die ein jugendliches und erwachsenes Publikum angesprochen hatten. Dieser Schritt war sinnvoll aus Sicht der großen Comic-Heft-Verlage, die den Vorstand der CMAA bildeten und deren Comics ohnehin auch schon vor der Einführung des Codes überwiegend an Kinder gerichtet waren. Erstens beendete man die zunehmend geschäftsschädigende Comic-Heft-Kontroverse. Zweitens entledigte man sich der Konkurrenz kleinerer Verlage (wie z.B. EC), die Comics für ältere Leser produziert hatten und dies nicht länger tun konnten. Drittens hielt der Baby Boom noch immer an und junge Kinder repräsentierten eine attraktive Zielgruppe, die nur mit dem Einverständnis der Eltern dieser Kinder erreicht werden konnte.

Bereits wenige Monate nach Einführung des Codes allerdings erschien die Entscheidung, auf jugendliche Leser fortan weitgehend zu verzichten, in einem anderen Licht. Die ersten Vertreter der Baby-Boom-Generation erreichten ihre Adoleszenz und der unaufhaltsame Aufstieg des Teen-Markts begann. Rock 'n' Roll wurde im Jahr 1956 zum Mainstream-Phänomen. Die Comic-Heft-Industrie, einst Pionier einer noch jungen Jugendkultur, hatte nun wegen der strengen Vorgaben des Codes keinen Zugriff auf diesen zunehmend lukrativen Teen-Markt.

Concluding Remarks / Abschließende Bemerkungen

Obwohl die von der CMAA eingesetzte Comics Code Authority ihren direkten Einfluss auf den Inhalt von Comic-Heften in den folgenden Jahrzehnten allmählich verlor, hat der Comics Code bis heute Spuren hinterlassen. Das Superhelden-Genre, das nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg zunächst in der Bedeutungslosigkeit zu versinken drohte, dominiert seit den sechziger Jahren wieder den Comic-Heft-Markt. Sowohl die genretypische Verehrung mächtiger und gewöhnlich männlicher Heldenfiguren als auch die weitgehend unkritische Darstellung des Status Quo, die das Genre seit 1941 geprägt hatte, deckten sich mit den ideologischen Vorgaben der Comics Code Authority.

Als die geburtenstarken Nachkriegsjahrgänge dem Teen-Markt in den späten fünfziger und frühen sechziger Jahren zum Durchbruch verhalfen, konnten sich die Superhelden-Comics im Konkurrenzkampf um jugendliche Kunden freilich trotz Einführung jugendlicher Protagonisten nicht gegen die Medien Film und Musik behaupten. Comics, die zur Idealisierung von Institutionen und Autoritätsfiguren verpflichtet waren, konnten in diesen Zeiten jugendlichen Aufbegehrens lediglich für Kinder von Interesse sein – und, wie sich herausstellen sollte, für einige Erwachsene, die mit dem Genre aufgewachsen und ihm noch immer nostalgisch zugetan waren. Um diese Erwachsenen eigens anzusprechen, wurden reflexive Elemente in die Geschichten integriert, welche die verordnete Vorhersehbarkeit der Handlung in einen für ältere Leser interessanteren Kontext rückten. „Textuelle“ Fanproduktivität dieser älteren Leser nach dem Vorbild der EC-Fangemeinde wurde durch die Veröffentlichung einiger ihrer Leserbriefe mit Absendern in den Comic-Heften angeregt; Interessenten für Fanzeitschriften waren so leicht zu finden. Einen Teil des Reizes der Fanzeitschriften machte die Tatsache aus, dass diese Publikationen nicht den Vorschriften der Comics Code Authority unterlagen und die verordnete Biederkeit der Comics folglich parodieren oder zumindest in historischen Kontext stellen konnten.

Die Comic-Heft-Industrie sah sich allerdings in Anbetracht der Vorgaben des Codes und der zunehmenden Konkurrenz durch das Medium Fernsehen nicht in der Lage, ihre Leserschaft wesentlich über die Zielgruppen Kinder und ältere Fans hinaus zu erweitern. Stattdessen verfolgten Marvel und DC ab Mitte der sechziger Jahre die Strategie, von der

bestehenden Leserschaft ein stärkeres Engagement einzufordern. Erzählstränge verschiedener Superhelden-Serien wurden zunehmend miteinander verflochten, so dass es immer schwieriger wurde, der Handlung ohne Kenntnis mehrerer oder idealerweise gar aller Titel des jeweiligen Verlags zu folgen. Es entstanden fiktive Universen, die das gelegentliche Lesen eines einzelnen Hefts erheblich erschwerten, die aber regelmäßigen Lesern vieler Titel Expertenstatus verliehen. Dieser Expertenstatus erlaubte es den Fans, die weit verbreitete Geringschätzung des Mediums als unqualifiziert abzutun.

Die Konkurrenz durch andere Medien hat in den letzten Jahrzehnten besonders im Kinder- und Jugendbereich stark zugenommen, und der Absatz von Comic-Heften ist weiter zurückgegangen. Während Superhelden im Rahmen der Medien Film, Fernsehen und Videospiel weltweit ein Millionenpublikum erreichen, richten sich ihre zunehmend verflochtenen Comic-Heft-Geschichten mehr denn je an einen überschaubaren Kreis erwachsener Fans. Andere Genres, die vor der Einführung des Comics Code ein breites Publikum erreicht hatten, fristen ein noch marginalisierteres Dasein. Die breite Öffentlichkeit identifiziert das Medium Comic-Heft mit dem Superhelden-Genre, mit kindlichen Lesern und einigen nostalgischen Sammlern – ein Image, das sich die Comic-Heft-Industrie mit Einführung und dann im Schatten des Comics Code selbst zugelegt hatte. Obwohl der Code inzwischen keine Rolle mehr spielt, ist es der Comic-Heft-Industrie bis heute nicht gelungen, aus seinem Schatten herauszutreten.

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