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A Rite of Passage: The Transformation of Anglo-American Comic Books in the Post-
World War II Era

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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KEY WORDS

Comics, American Popular Culture, History

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Komiksy, Americká populární kultura, Dějiny

Abstract

The subject matter of the bachelor thesis is the evolution of Anglo-American mainstream comic books in the post-World War II era, with principal focus on the epochs that have transformed this art form the most during the past seventy years. The thesis aims to present Anglo-American comic books as a medium with substantial storytelling potential that had to struggle with harsh censorship and the unforgiving dynamics of the entertainment industry in order to maintain its position in Western popular culture. The continuous efforts of comic books to remain socially relevant and to connect with audiences are explored through an overview of key decades in the medium's history, which are accompanied by the analyses of select works. The contents as well as format of these works show that comic books are a remarkably adaptive art form that can not only operate within a wide array of genres but also merge with other forms of popular entertainment, transcending the boundaries of traditional media.

The first chapter contains a brief overview of the origins and post-war development of comic books, while the subsequent passages offer a more detailed analysis of three crucial periods in the medium's history. The first era discussed are the 1950s, during which socially conscious mainstream publications refusing to feed the self-satisfaction of American popular culture emerged on the market. The short stories "In Gratitude," "The Whipping," "The 10th at Noon," and "Judgment Day" published by Entertaining Comics are used to illustrate how some highly popular comic books of the decade openly criticized racism in American society and depicted the Cold War as a gateway to mutually assured destruction. The chapter also examines the escalating attacks on the supposedly amoral content of comic books, and the repercussions of the severe censorship that the industry adopted in reaction to them. The next section looks at the resurrection of superhero comics, examining the problematic aspects of this genre, but also illustrating its maturation on the examples of Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen*.

The last major chapter is concerned with the development of the comic book industry in the past twenty five years, and examines how shrinking sales led publishers to seek ways in which comic book franchises could become a part of other, more profitable forms of popular entertainment. This section looks at the advantages that movie, television, and video game adaptations of comic books enjoy, as well as the challenges they face. Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy* is presented as one of the most compelling examples of what such adaptations can achieve. The conclusion summarizes the findings of the previous chapters and

reaffirms the position of comic books as an enduring and quintessential part of Western popular culture. Apart from the analysis of primary sources, the thesis also relies on secondary literature, most notably Bradford W. Wright's *Comic Book Nation* and *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* by Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith.

Abstrakt práce

Bakalářská práce se zabývá rozvojem angloamerického komiksu po druhé světové válce s důrazem na období, která za posledních sedmdesát let nejvíce přispěla k přeměně této umělecké formy. Práce usiluje o prezentaci angloamerického komiksu jakožto média se značnou vypravěčskou schopností, které muselo zápasit se ostrou cenzurou a s nelítostnou dynamikou amerického zábavního průmyslu, aby obhájilo svou pozici v západní populární kultuře. Nepřetržitá snaha komiksů udržet své obecenstvo a svou společenskou relevanci je prozkoumána pomocí přehledu klíčových desetiletí v jejich dějinách. Přehled doprovází rozbor vybraných děl. Jak obsah, tak i formát těchto děl ukazuje, že komiks je pozoruhodně přizpůsobivým uměleckým směrem, jenž dokáže nejen pracovat s velkým množstvím žánrů, ale také splynout s dalšími médii, přesahujíc tak jejich tradiční meze.

První kapitola obsahuje stručný přehled původu a poválečného rozvoje komiksu, přičemž následující pasáže poskytují podrobnější analýzu tří zásadních období v dějinách tohoto žánru. Prvním z nich jsou padesátá léta 20. století, kdy na trhu zaznamenaly úspěch komiksy s kritickým obsahem, odmítající přispívat k samolibosti americké populární kultury. Povídky „S vděčností“, „Bičování“, „V poledne desátého“ a „Den rozsudku“ od vydavatele Entertaining Comics ilustrují, jak některé oblíbené publikace otevřeně kritizovaly rasismus v americké společnosti a vykreslovaly Studenou válku jako pohromu vedoucí k oboustranné záhubě. Kapitola taktéž věnuje pozornost zesilujícím se útokům na údajně nemorální obsah komiksů a následně přijaté tvrdé cenzuře. Další pasáž se zaměřuje na zmrtvýchvstání superhrdinských komiksů a zkoumá problematiku stránek tohoto žánru, zároveň ale také ilustruje jeho rozvoj skrz publikace *Temný rytíř se vrací* od Franka Millera a *Strážci* od Alana Moorea.

Poslední rozsáhlejší kapitola se zabývá situací komiksového průmyslu v posledních pětadvaceti letech, během nichž byli vydavatelé zákaznickou nepřízní přinuceni hledat cesty, kterými by se komiksové značky daly prosadit v jiných, výnosnějších médiích. Tato sekce rozebírá výhody i nevýhody filmové, televizní a videoherní adaptace komiksu, přičemž trilogie *Temný rytíř* od Christophera Nolana je použita jako příklad. Závěr shrnuje nejpodstatnější body předešlých kapitol a zdůrazňuje přetrvávající vliv angloamerických komiksů v západní populární kultuře. Vedle rozborů děl se práce také opírá o sekundární literaturu, především o texty *Comic Book Nation* od Bradforda W. Wrighta a *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* od Randyho Duncana a Matthewa J. Smithe.

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Introduction

Comic books are a form of sequential art that blurs the barrier between words and drawn pictures, molding them into a unit “to be read as a single integrated text.”¹ The most basic communicative units of the medium are referred to as panels, regardless of the actual shape of their borders. Panels encapsulate certain moments of the “prime action” and furnish the depicted events with related texts that can range from dialogues to onomatopoeia or interior monologues.² Consequently, audiences are required to interpret and connect these individual units into interrelated scenes and sequences that run through numerous pages. As other forms of written and visual arts, many comic books make extensive use of signs, symbols, and intertextual meaning, which can result in narratives with a remarkably complex structure.

Although comic books have been an integral part of American popular culture throughout the twentieth century, little academic research has been conducted about this form of graphic storytelling until the past three decades. One of the possible explanations for this is that comic books are ultimately a “generational experience,” with most mainstream publications targeting an adolescent audience, who ultimately outgrow them.³ Even comic book scholars admit that the medium “epitomize[s] the accessibility, disposability, and appeal to instant gratification that lie at the core of modern consumer culture”⁴ and that the “vast majority of comic books that have been produced are simply not very good.”⁵ This, however, reflects the drawbacks of the industry’s business model rather than proves that comic books are inherently limited in their storytelling capabilities. The medium has its fair share of exceptional works, in and outside the mainstream, some of which have gained widespread recognition. In 1992, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1991) became the first (and so far only) comic book to receive the Pulitzer Prize,⁶ while Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1986-1987) was named one of the best novels published between 1923 and 2005 by the *Time* magazine.⁷ The fact that

¹ Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009) 14.

² Duncan, Smith 10.

³ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) xiii.

⁴ Wright xiv.

⁵ Duncan, Smith 118.

⁶ “1992 Winners and Finalists,” *The Pulitzer Prizes*, The Pulitzer Prizes <<http://www.pulitzer.org/awards/1992>> 8 November 2013.

⁷ James Kelly, et al., “Time’s List of the 100 Best Novels (1923-2005),” *Time Entertainment*, Time, 16 October 2005 <<http://entertainment.time.com/2005/10/16/all-time-100-novels/slide/times-list-of-the-100-best-novels/#all>> 8 November 2013.

the latter author is British also indicates that the American comic book industry has been increasingly enriched by international talent.⁸

Throughout the history of their existence, comic books have repeatedly shown that they can incorporate relevant social and political themes into their narratives, and that they do not shy away from self-reflection. While such critical thinking has never characterized the entire industry, the thesis argues that periods during which certain highly popular publications were willing to work with provocative subtexts played a pivotal role in the maturation of this art form. An adequate analysis of these crucial decades cannot, however, be accomplished without exploring the medium's overall development after World War II in broad strokes, since every event that rocked the comic book industry in the past seventy years had a profound effect across all publishers and genres. While most of these events can be directly linked to larger historical forces at work, such as the Second Red Scare in the early 1950s, the emerging counterculture a decade later, or the rise of new media in the past twenty-five years, examining their specific repercussions for comic books and their creators is of paramount importance in understanding the industry's changing dynamics.

The thesis' goal is to take a closer look at the decades which have transformed the medium the most, with a strong emphasis on specific mainstream publications that have contributed to the maturation of comic books by confronting the cultural anxieties of their day. The first chapter begins with a brief look at the early days of American comic books and continues with a chronological overview introducing key periods in their history. These eras are examined in greater detail in subsequent passages, accompanied by the analyses of selected works. Chapters two and three deal with the medium's maturation and the challenges to this process, while the fourth chapter is concerned with the growing interconnectedness of comic books with other popular media and the implications of this relationship for their future.⁹

⁸ The thesis examines several works produced in the U.S. that are connected with British authors, which is the reason for the "Anglo-American" designation both in the title and the body of the text.

⁹ The use of punctuation marks in comic books is frequently erratic compared to most other forms of written texts. The thesis aims to maintain as much of this style in direct quotations as possible and resorts to changes only in the most extreme cases. It does, however, consistently alter the all-capital letter spelling that most comic books use, for the sake of readability.

1. The Origins and Brief History of Comic Books

The origins of comic books are firmly rooted in another form of sequential art, comic strips. Devised to increase circulation, comic strips stories became popular features of newspapers and other periodicals by the late nineteenth century and they were not meant for individual publication. The narratives of comic strips work almost exclusively within the genres of comedy or farce, conveying stories in a handful of panels with a very simple layout and composition.¹ Despite the sharp distinction made between the two art forms today, the first comic books were actually comic strips repackaged into individual publications. This changed when the Dell Publishing Company and Eastern Color Printing Company released their first issue of *The Funnies* (1929-1930), which established a precedent for the production of original material.² In their early years, comic books were not an immediate success and they did not venture far from their origins, mostly providing collections of humorous tales. It was not until 1938 that the industry truly took off, when the first issue of *Action Comics* sporting an early incarnation of the legendary Superman on its cover “single-handedly established the identity of the American comic book.”³ The genres diversified even further after this triumphant debut, but by this time the designation “comics” had already become inseparably associated with the medium, regardless of comic books’ fading connection to their immediate roots.

Superheroes rose to fame as individuals fighting for the common man against corrupt businessmen and gangsters in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal America, and subsequently as patriots combating the German and Japanese threat. Such icons as Captain America often ventured directly to the frontlines to face their adversaries, who were depicted as subhuman creatures vastly inferior to the shining American heroes preaching democracy, freedom, and somewhat ironically, racial tolerance and understanding. This era would later become known as “The Golden Age of Comic Books;” full of optimism, simplicity, and the triumph of American principles.⁴ The situation, however, changed rapidly once the Cold War cast its shadow over America. The era proved too ambiguous and insecure to warrant the continuous success of these moral paragons in tights. By the end of 1947, superhero comics began to

¹ Duncan, Smith 5-7.

² Duncan, Smith 28-29.

³ Duncan, Smith 31.

⁴ Wright 54-55.

falter and all but a select few were cancelled.⁵ Where the supermen of the Second World War have failed, however, other genres triumphed. Romance, teenage comics, funny animals, war stories, but most notably horror, science fiction and crime narratives reigned over the first half of the 1950s. Not only was this the only epoch in the history of comic books when the mainstream market was free of the overpowering influence of superheroes, but it also marked the first time when certain publications challenged the status quo.⁶

Unlike publishers reluctant to raise their voices against the dominant ideology, William Gaines' Entertaining Comics (commonly referred to as EC Comics, or EC) launched an attack on the "myths, triumphalism, and half-truths" proliferated by most of American popular culture at the time.⁷ EC's comic books regularly confronted their readers with the deeply-rooted racism in American society and the injustice of segregation. They also refused to depict the ongoing Korean War as a glorious endeavor or caricaturize the enemy as the competition did, focusing on the mutual suffering on both sides instead and the potentially catastrophic consequences of the escalating Cold War.⁸ For a brief time, these publications became an alternative to the prevailing cultural ideology, but they soon met their premature end. Comic books grew into an economic powerhouse, churning out more than 150 million issues every month by 1954 and they were a virtually unsupervised medium.⁹ Therefore, when nation-wide concerns over the increasingly assertive and rebellious younger generation began growing, comic books became prime suspects in encouraging this dangerous trend. A witch hunt ensued, which culminated in the hearings of the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. Among the expert witnesses was Dr. Fredric Wertham, whose (in)famous book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1953) directly linked violence in comic books with the supposed rise of crime among youngsters.¹⁰ Publishers were pushed into creating a self-censoring mechanism in 1954, the Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America. Wholesalers would not distribute publications not approved by this board, which meant a death sentence to most of EC's successful series.

After 1954, comic books entered their "Era of Retrenchment."¹¹ The censorship had eradicated the most popular genres of crime and horror, and the industry had a hard time competing against television that had conquered almost every household in America by the

⁵ Duncan, Smith 36.

⁶ Wright 135.

⁷ Wright 152-153.

⁸ Wright 137-145.

⁹ Duncan, Smith 39.

¹⁰ Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rienhart & Company, Inc., 1953) 13.

¹¹ Duncan, Smith 40.

second half of the fifties.¹² Ultimately, publishers found the solution in the revival of superheroes, whose unquestionable moral integrity made them attractive again.¹³ Marvel Comics, which would later become the leading force in the industry, succeeded in the early sixties by introducing fallible heroes with conflicted personalities and self-esteem issues, such as Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four. This ushered in the “The Silver Age”¹⁴ and eventually “The Bronze Age” renaissance of costumed heroes.¹⁵ Regardless of the censorship, as the cultural climate changed in America, mainstream comic books had to adapt in order to survive. The protest movements of the American youth convinced publishers of mainstream comic books that their products had to become more socially aware to connect with audiences. Since superheroes were still moral paragons at their core, experiments of implementing social relevancy into their adventures could be carried out within relatively safe bounds.¹⁶ These endeavors received positive feedback, but there was no consistent effort at challenging the dominant ideology as in the case of EC Comics. In general, the late sixties and seventies were a period when publishers “seemed to be throwing everything against the wall just to see what would stick.”¹⁷

The hit-and-miss attitude of the previous decades began to bear its fruits in the mid-eighties. “The Modern Age” began with two pivotal publications, *Watchmen* (1986-1987) and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986).¹⁸ Not only did these comic books echo much of the disillusionment and skepticism featured in EC Comics’ legendary series, but they also provided a deconstruction of the superhero myth and have popularized the graphic novel format.¹⁹ While antiheroes became increasingly popular and comic book genres diversified further after these landmark publications, the industry was hit by a severe economic recession in the 1990s.²⁰ Today, the circulation of comic books remains a far cry from their heydays in the 1950s and while superheroes still unequivocally dominate the market, even they have

¹² Duncan, Smith 40.

¹³ Duncan, Smith 45.

¹⁴ Jamie Coville, “The Silver Age,” *Penn State University, Integrative Arts*, Penn State University <http://www.psu.edu/dept/inart10_110/inart10/cmbk6silver.html> 10 November 2013.

¹⁵ Jamie Coville, “The Bronze Age of the Mainstream and the Rise of the Post Modern Graphic Novel,” *Penn State University, Integrative Arts*, Penn State University <http://www.psu.edu/dept/inart10_110/inart10/cmbk8bronze.html> 10 November 2013.

¹⁶ Duncan, Smith 58-61.

¹⁷ Duncan, Smith 61.

¹⁸ Gregory J. Golda, “The Rise of the Post-Modern Graphic Novel,” *Penn State University, Integrative Arts*, Penn State University, March 1997 <http://www.psu.edu/dept/inart10_110/inart10/cmbk9pmgn.html> 10 November 2013.

¹⁹ Duncan, Smith 70-72.

²⁰ Duncan, Smith 76.

moved beyond the struggling industry.²¹ From the early 2000s, costumed heroes have been systematically conquering Hollywood and television, reaching unprecedented popularity worldwide through various adaptations.²² Since the comic book industry continues to wane, it remains to be seen whether its most iconic contributions to popular culture will persist on the pages of long-running publications or whether their legacy will be completely taken over by other media.

²¹ Even the most successful mainstream series sells only around an estimated 120 000 monthly copies. See “September 2013 Comic Book Sales Figures,” *Comichron: The Comics Chronicles*, Comichron <<http://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/2013/2013-09.html>> 10 November 2013.

²² For the American box office performance of comic book movies see “Comic Book Adaptation,” *Box Office Mojo*, International Movie Database <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=comicbookadaptation.htm>> 10 November 2013.

2. Confronting Racism and Censorship in the 1950s

The end of World War II marked the beginning of an immensely eventful epoch for the comic book industry. Although the market was still filled with the escapist adventures of patriotic heroes taking on the enemies of democracy, while completely ignoring the less flattering social and political issues of the day, an alternative was beginning to emerge. The 1950s gave birth to some of the first socially conscious mainstream publications that reflected the cultural anxieties of the Cold War era and criticized the shortcomings of the seemingly spotless American society. Nevertheless, the decade also belonged to the continuous efforts to impose censorship on the growingly popular medium of comic books. The chapter offers an analysis of several short stories published by the notorious Entertaining Comics, after defining the pivotal role that this company had in comic book history. “In Gratitude” and “The Whipping” are used to demonstrate the publisher’s unforgiving criticism of American society’s blatant racism, while “The 10th at Noon” shows a thoroughly pessimistic vision of the Cold War’s outcome. In its second part, the chapter deals with the public backlash against comic books and it illustrates the results of the censorship imposed on the medium through the science fiction story “Judgment Day.”

Although it was superheroes who established comic books as a commercially viable industry, the end of World War II left them in a tough position. Since America had defeated its enemies abroad and enjoyed economic prosperity at home, the postwar direction of costumed hero adventures “de-emphasized social commentary in favor of lighthearted juvenile fantasy.”¹ Superman, Batman, and their colleagues were suddenly full of slapstick humor, taking on one outlandish science fiction adventure after another, and audiences soon fell out of love with the once phenomenally popular characters.² The fading market for superhuman avengers, however, did not mean that the industry as a whole would fall on hard times. Even though the period between 1938 and 1947 is often referred to as “The Golden Age of Comic Books,” it was a golden age first and foremost for superheroes.³ Their temporary disappearance opened up the market to a wide variety of other genres, most notably crime and horror comic books, which offered far more challenging narratives, leading to the arguably most important decade in the medium’s history.

¹ Wright 59.

² Duncan, Smith 36.

³ Jamie Coville, “The Golden Age of Superheroes,” *Penn State University, Integrative Arts*, Penn State University <http://www.psu.edu/dept/inart10_110/inart10/> 13 December 2013.

A relatively small publisher, Entertaining Comics achieved disproportionately big success during this era under the guidance of William Gaines, who inherited the company from his late father in 1947. Gaines valued quality over quantity and paid some of the highest wages to his employees, attracting many of the most talented artists in the field.⁴ EC's publications under the banner of "New Trend" included several horror, crime, science fiction and war titles that "were intelligently written, wonderfully drawn, and as gory as hell."⁵ Most importantly, however, the products of Gaines' company epitomized the possibilities lying in comic books as a medium facing virtually no censorship in an era when other forms of mass entertainment were already under strict content supervision. Even gritty noir movies depicting the omnipresent corruption and moral decay of society were subject to the rigid rules of the Motion Picture Production Code,⁶ while television was even more restricted by the Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters.⁷ In consequence, the country's media of mass entertainment were unable to deal with some of the most pressing and controversial issue of the decade, such as racial segregation. The United States witnessed several landmark events during the decade, including the Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, and eventually the rise of the African-American Civil Rights Movement, yet the social problems leading to these events were left largely unexplored by 1950s mainstream culture.⁸ EC Comics were one of the few that openly confronted racism, bigotry, and depicted the twisted side of the idealized American middle class life, injecting "a dose of sober revisionism and liberating anarchy" into an otherwise "self-satisfied culture of abundance and moral certitude."⁹

EC's New Trend series was unique because regardless of the freedom comic books enjoyed, rarely did other publications take the risk of defying the dominant ideology. Superhero and war comic books were commenting on the public opinion and U.S. government policy from their very birth,¹⁰ but even after the bitter Korean War began, they kept championing a black-and-white notion of good and evil, taking American's physical and

⁴ Wright 136.

⁵ Duncan, Smith 38.

⁶ Robert J. Bresler, *Us Vs. Them: American Political and Cultural Conflict from WW II to Watergate* (Wilmington, Del: SR Books, 2000) 173-176.

⁷ Robert Pondillo, *America's First Network TV Censor: The Work of NBC's Stockton Helffrich* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010) 69.

⁸ Melvyn Stokes, *American History Through Hollywood Film: From the Revolution to the 1960s* (London: Continuum Publishing Co., 2013) 131-133.

⁹ Wright 136.

¹⁰ Marc DiPaolo, *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2001) 1.

moral superiority for granted.¹¹ The most popular teenage comic book series, *Archie* followed the adventures of a ‘typical’ American youth who “[n]ever uses teen slang, never fights, never smokes [...] and betrays only the vaguest hint of his libido,”¹² while romance comic books aimed at a female audience (mostly written by men) promoted traditional gender roles.¹³ EC’s considerable line-up stood on the opposite end of the spectrum. The comic books published by Gaines bluntly portrayed America as a place riddled with evil and prejudice, warning that the United States were “not a ‘melting pot’ that dissolved racial, religious, ethnic, and political differences into a national consensus” but a “society at war with itself.”¹⁴ *Shock SuspenStories* was EC’s most political publication, particularly focused on questioning the moral integrity of Cold War America.¹⁵ The stories contained in this bimonthly series were mostly aimed at exposing the underlying racism in American middle class society, something that could be hardly confronted by Hollywood, which was practically closed to African-Americans in the fifties,¹⁶ while television’s most popular representation of black communities, the sitcom *Amos ‘n’ Andy* (1951-1953), still drew its comic appeal from racial stereotypes.¹⁷

“In Gratitude” is one EC’s most unforgiving attacks on the moral hypocrisy behind segregation. The story from the magazine’s eleventh issue opens with an idyllic setting, showing the town of Centerville dressed in red, white and blue as it eagerly expects the return of its Korean War veteran, Joey Norris. When the young man arrives, the mayor cheerfully urges the townsfolk to “start wavin’ those flags” and “put on a show for him!”, but the picturesque atmosphere is soon subverted by Joey holding out the metal clap substituting for his missing arm to shake hands with his father.¹⁸ The subsequent family meal at the Norris household concludes by Joey setting off to visit the grave of his friend Hank, who was to be buried in the family plot, since he died shielding the young veteran from a grenade explosion in Korea. The parents explain to Joey that they could not go through with their promise due to the pressure from the community, as everyone was shocked to learn after the arrival of Hank’s body that he was black. The last scene then transitions to the town hall, where Joey holds a

¹¹ Wright 54-55, 122-123.

¹² Wright 73.

¹³ Duncan, Smith 203-206.

¹⁴ Wright 142.

¹⁵ Wright 137.

¹⁶ Gerald Horne, *Class Struggle in Hollywood 1930-1950: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds, & Trade Unionists* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001) 52.

¹⁷ Mel Watkins, “What Was It About Amos ‘n’ Andy?” *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, 7 July 1991 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1991/07/07/books/what-was-it-about-amos-n-andy.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>> 10 December 2013.

¹⁸ “In Gratitude,” *Shock SuspenStories #11* (Entertaining Comics, October-November 1953) 1-2.

crushing speech in front of the entire town in which he condemns them for their racial hatred, asking “[w]hat did [Hank] die for? What did I give my arm for? You say you’re proud of me. Well, I’m not proud of you. I’m ashamed of you...and for you!” (7)

While the usual length of the individual stories contained in EC comic books was around seven to ten pages, “In Gratitude” proves that even such meager space can be utilized effectively to deliver a moving and hard-hitting experience. Joey’s entire narrative builds up to the young veteran’s speech explaining why Hank was denied a proper burial place. The climax comes when he tells his audience that the two of them “fought for democracy together,” yet when the time came to honor Hank for his sacrifice, his body “wasn’t good enough because its skin wasn’t the right color” (7). Beyond this direct confrontation, the contrast between the story’s idyllic imagery and its content also adds strength to the unsettling atmosphere, especially the war flashbacks which are visualized in the way Joey’s parents dreamed them up while reading their son’s letters. In the panels that portray the heroic soldier’s last minutes, it can be distinctly seen that Hank’s skin has the same color as Joey’s, just as the parents expected it would be. This depiction, however, also underlines the veteran’s final argument that “the grenade that tore [Hank’s] skin to pieces didn’t care if it was white or black” (7). The idyllic image of Centerville is therefore a facade of false security and complacency to be shattered by a story that points out how convoluted the ideals of a seemingly flawless community can be.

While “In Gratitude” deals with a covert form of racism, *Shock SuspenStories* did not shy away from depicting racial hatred in its more aggressive and violent forms. “The Whipping” from the series’ fourteenth issue stars a middle-aged father whose daughter falls in love with Louis, a Hispanic newcomer to the neighborhood. Horrified by the thought of someone of “olive skin and the raven hair” touching his “white, white daughter”¹⁹ and afraid that the neighborhood will be run over by “dirty spicks” (2), Ed decides to form a vigilante society. Through false allegations against Louis, he manages to raise enough negative sentiment in like-minded fathers “to act...to band together...to hide behind pillow case hoods and bed-sheet robes and drive the intruder from their street” (5). The story takes a cruel turn when the blindfolded person that the freshly-formed Ku Klux Klan dragged out of Louis’ house and whipped to death turns out to be none other than Ed’s daughter, who has married her suitor in secret.

¹⁹ “The Whipping,” *Shock SuspenStories* #14 (Entertaining Comics, April-May 1954) 4.

Opposed to “In Gratitude” that conveys its message mostly through dialogue, the strongest anti-racist sentiment in “The Whipping” can be found in the authorial narrative voice. As the group of fathers bands together, the captions accompanying the individual panels explicitly warn against the lunacy of racial hatred:

The fiction of differently colored skin...the absurdity of oddly shaped facial features...the illusion of strange accents...the myth of unfamiliar religions...all these are fantasies of hate. They are the delusions of the bigot...the exaggerations of those who desire to exaggerate [...] searching for their fantasy enemies...the olive skin...the dark hair...the accent (6).

“The Whipping” is engaged in condemning xenophobia to such an extent that it propels the story to the borders of didactic literature. This moralizing tone speaks volumes about the responsibility that the creative team at EC Comics felt towards engaging with contemporary social issues in a frank and unabashed manner, refusing to stay indifferent.²⁰ It is, therefore, not surprising that compared to publications that were on the market a few years earlier, the New Trend series provided an astounding improvement in terms of quality and social relevancy for comic books.

EC also offered a wildly different interpretation of the Cold War than the jingoistic comic books that celebrated America’s superiority. “The 10th at Noon” from *Weird Fantasy #11* opens with the United Nations receiving an ultimatum from the “Eastern Alliance” that threatens them with a hydrogen bomb strike.²¹ While the members of the UN evaluate the probability of the attack and hypothesize on the potential outcome of an all-out war between the superpowers, two scientists invent a machine which allows them to send objects back and forth in time. Oblivious of the looming war, the two inventors send a camera into the future, which arrives to take a picture of New York’s skyline half an hour after the ultimatum. After the machine’s return, the scientists are horrified to discover that Manhattan lies in ashes on the photo they have developed. This haunting short story represents a distinctively different approach to the Cold War than the spy stories of such publications as *Atomic War!*, *Kent Blake of the Secret Service*, or *T-Man* that depicted the triumphant battles of Western heroes against “godless Communists.”²² “The 10th at Noon” shows no interest in examining the moral or ideological superiority of either side, its sole purpose is to warn against the catastrophic consequences of the intensifying arms race. While EC Comics did offer titles that

²⁰ Wright 136.

²¹ “The 10th at Noon,” *Weird Fantasy #11* (Entertaining Comics, January-February 1952) 1.

²² Wright 121, 123.

pitted Western and Soviet heroes against each other, these titles have also kept a sober attitude towards the conflict, refusing to promote trigger-happy patriotism. EC's Cold War was "removed from the context of lofty rhetoric and crusading zeal, and presented in its essence, which [...] amounted to madness and self-destruction."²³

The comic book industry reached its zenith in audience and sales between 1950 and 1954, but the growing popularity of crime and horror titles started to draw an increasing amount of negative attention towards this billion dollar enterprise.²⁴ EC's popular horror series *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Vault of Horror*, and *The Haunt of Fear* featured macabre tales abundant in blood and tongue-in-cheek morbid humor which made these narratives absurd rather than threatening despite the amount of gore.²⁵ Due to the success of these magazines, however, every publisher on the market launched their own imitation, trying to capitalize on the popularity of horror comic books. Even if the competition could only seldom outdo EC at originality and humor, they frequently managed to do so at gruesomeness. This resulted in the surge of violent comic books, which turned the attention of those concerned about the supposed rise in juvenile delinquency towards the growingly popular medium.²⁶ The anti-comic book paranoia reached its crescendo with the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency's hearings, which managed to do great damage to the medium's reputation. Dr. Fredric Wertham, a distinguished psychiatrist, was called as an expert witness to present his studies from his dubious work *Seduction of the Innocent* that directly connected comic books with asocial and violent behavior, while William Gaines' attempt to defend artistic freedom and the "good taste" of his horror and crime publications misfired completely.²⁷

Since the political climate of the 1950s grew increasingly conservative with the Second Red Scare, it is understandable that the attacks which presented comic books as a moral hazard fell on fertile ground. *Seduction of the Innocent* exploited the fears of Cold War America particularly well, since Wertham managed to connect the popular medium with complete moral decadence. The psychiatrist raised many objections in his study, which ranged from comic books promoting crime and decreasing the intellectual capabilities of readers to fixating "homoerotic tendencies by suggesting the form of an adolescent-with-adult or Ganymede-Zeus type of love relationship" (190). Some of Wertham's most obscure findings included pointing out "pictures within pictures" in various publications that revealed

²³ Wright 143.

²⁴ Wright 155.

²⁵ Wright 151.

²⁶ Wright 156.

²⁷ Wright 157-169.

genitalia “for children who know how to look” (220), and a detailed analysis of how the adventures of Batman and Robin stimulate homosexual fantasies.²⁸ While most parents did not read Wertham’s book nor watched the hearings, the basic message that filtered through the media was overwhelmingly condemning. Publishers were afraid that if they do not act in time, an external regulation of the industry would follow, which led to the self-imposed Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America (better known as the Comics Code). This series of rigid and conservative rules effectively swept the most popular genres out of existence, along with all the challenging subtext. While publishers who were putting out relatively unobjectionable material have profited from their competitors going out of business, the strict content restrictions left the entire industry in an uncertain position.²⁹

EC Comics ended up reluctantly joining the Comics Magazine Association of America, but Gaines soon became fed up with censorship and cancelled all his comic books except the popular *Mad* magazine.³⁰ Before he did so, however, Gaines fought several battles for keeping his products clear of censorship, including defending the reprint of “Judgment Day” in the February issue of *Incredible Science Fiction* in 1956. “Judgment Day” takes place in the distant future, where a lonely astronaut named Tarlton is sent to assess the society of robots on the Planet of Mechanical Life, evaluating whether they are ready to join Earth’s Great Galactic Republic. The human visitor sees that the sentient machines have made remarkable advancements by reaching the technological level of humanity in the twentieth century; however, he soon discovers that the society on Cybrina is segregated into orange and blue robots. While the former group thrives and has a wide array of choices, their less fortunate brothers are condemned to the southern parts of their great city and enjoy a less privileged life. Tarlton’s confused guide attempts to excuse himself numerous times during their journey, telling the traveler that the conditions “existed long before I was made! What can I do about it? I’m only one robot!”³¹ The story concludes with the astronaut leaving the planet and telling his bewildered escort that they do have the ability to transcend their limitations, because “[f]or a while, on Earth, it looked like there was no hope! But when mankind on Earth learned to live together, real progress first began. The universe was suddenly ours” (7). The last panel then shows Tarlton on his space vessel finally removing the helmet that has been covering his face so far, and the reader can see as “the instrument lights [make] the beads of perspiration on his dark skin twinkle like distant stars” (7).

²⁸ Wertham 191.

²⁹ Duncan, Smith 39-40.

³⁰ Wright 177.

³¹ “Judgment Day,” *Weird Fantasy #18* (Entertaining Comics, March-April 1953) 6.

The obvious set-up of the tale is to contrast humanity's current state mirrored in the society of androids with its grand potential. Even though Tarlton's initial realization that the inhabitants of Cybrina distinguish each other based solely on their sheathing appears tragic due to its parallels with ethnic discrimination, the astronaut's final monologue implies that this state can be overcome through conscious effort. The utopian Galactic Republic that Tarlton comes from foreshadows a fundamentally optimistic vision of humankind's progress that would be featured later in such science fiction narratives as the legendary *Star Trek* series (1966-1969), which attempted to present "a future in which discrimination on the grounds of race or gender was a thing of the past."³² The Galactic Republic, just like the United Federation of Planets in *Star Trek*, can be read as a utopian descendant of the United Nations which succeeded in transplanting its ideals on a global scale (and beyond).³³ The fact that Gaines had to threaten the Comics Magazine Association of America with a lawsuit in order to get "Judgment Day" republished without turning Tarlton white, however, shows that the aftermath of the anti-comic book hysteria was not appropriate for this kind of idealism and it also foreshadowed how the American comic book industry would (not) look like in the following years.³⁴ Nevertheless, thanks to such minor triumphs, the era of EC Comics seems to have ultimately ended on a positive note. Tarlton's dark skin glistening like the galaxy's stars is a fitting epitaph to an entire generation of critical mainstream comic books, as well as the true golden age of the industry that would never again enjoy the same kind of mass circulation and readership that it did before the Comics Code.³⁵

³² Matthew Kapell, *Star Trek As Myth: Essays on Symbol and Archetype at the Final Frontier* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2010) 93.

³³ Johannes Steinl, *A Post-Colonial Approach to Science Fiction: Narrations of Imperialism Within "Star Trek"* (München: Grin Verlag, 2010) 9.

³⁴ Wright 177.

³⁵ Wright 179.

3. Superheroes Strike Back

After the disappearance of horror and crime comic books, the sanitized violence and moral purity of superheroes started to become attractive again for publishers seeking to rejuvenate their falling revenues.¹ While costumed avengers were vastly more complex in their 1960s renaissance than their counterparts in “The Golden Age,” the inherent restrictions of the genre and the industry’s business model prevented their narratives from adopting an approach that would be as subversive and critical of their contemporary times as that of some 1950s publications. Although superhero comic books did not ignore the growing lack of trust in the government during and after the Vietnam War years, it took more than two decades for them to find a suitable format in which these anxieties could take a central role without jeopardizing their commercial potential. Two publications which played a key role in this process are Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*, the latter being a foremost example of British authors making a name for themselves in the American comic book industry during the 1980s. Both aforementioned works are subject to analysis in the latter half of this chapter, which also looks at the so-called graphic novel format and attempts to explain its popularity. Before reaching this point, however, the chapter examines the repercussions that the Comics Code resulted in, and how publishers came to resurrect the superhero genre.

The banning of horror and crime genres that ruled over the 1950s initially resulted in an “Era of Retrenchment,” during which the resources of publishers were constantly being moved from one temporarily successful genre to the other.² The critique of politics, religion and social norms survived only in the underground “comix” of the 1960s and early 1970s; however, these publications did not find a wide enough audience and faded away.³ In their attempt to discover the new golden goose, DC Comics started revamping their old superheroes, while the reformed Marvel Comics introduced fallible costumed characters to the market.⁴ Soon, superheroes were once more the driving force of the industry, in no small part because of legendary Marvel editor, writer, and producer Stan Lee’s inventiveness both as a creator and businessman. Lee was responsible for a new wave of iconic figures, who were not only endowed with superhuman abilities, but who also had flaws and weaknesses

¹ Duncan, Smith 45.

² Duncan, Smith 42.

³ Duncan, Smith 57-58.

⁴ Duncan, Smith 45-46.

that readers could easily identify with, such as self-esteem issues and a constant need to struggle for recognition. Marvel's most popular superhero, Spider-Man, appeared to be a "Holden Caulfield who punches bad guys" compared to the rigid DC Comics characters born decades earlier.⁵ Lee then managed to make his creations even more intriguing to readers by placing them into a shared universe, where special crossover storylines could occur and the characters could interact with one another.⁶

The newcomers of the "The Marvel Age" may have been a revolutionary phenomenon in comic books; however, they merely brought costumed avengers closer to the long-established Western frontier heroes of American popular culture who "defend the community while maintaining personal distance from society."⁷ This approach provided Stan Lee and his colleagues with a suitable compromise; the brooding and imperfect nature of their creations made them popular with a new generation of readers, yet the morality of these heroes was never truly endangered, since they always respected authority and refrained from killing.⁸ The Marvel characters would keep true to this tradition even as the Comics Code eroded during the early 1970s, but the years of the escalating Vietnam War and Watergate Scandal did bring some more radical attempts at making superhero comic books socially relevant. One of the earliest endeavors was DC Comics' *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series, which featured the uneasy partnership of a radically conservative and ultra-liberal superhero, whose adventures touched on political corruption, racism, and social injustice in the US.⁹ The positive critical feedback of the series proved that American culture has changed profoundly since the comic book paranoia of the 1950s, but the sales left the publisher disappointed and as the legacy of the Flower Children faded away in the 1970s, it became obvious that audiences were demanding less moralizing and more punching from their favorite characters. By Ronald Reagan's 1980s, antiheroes unencumbered by liberal sensibilities, who dissected their adversaries with righteous violence, have established themselves as the most successful archetypes.¹⁰

Immediate sales numbers were, however, not the only factor that made the maturation of superhero comic books a slow process. The model upon which the genre (and most of the comic book industry) was built has more deeply embedded restrictions. As Umberto Eco

⁵ Jordan Raphael and Tom Spurgeon, *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago Review Press, 2003) 102.

⁶ Wright 218.

⁷ Wright 205.

⁸ Wright 218-219.

⁹ Duncan, Smith 60.

¹⁰ Wright 265.

emphasizes in his seminal essay “The Myth of Superman,” superheroes are an uneasy, perhaps even paradoxical combination of archetypal figures and a need for character development that comes with their romance-like stories.¹¹ Even though these costumed avengers have godlike capabilities and many of them could single-handedly bring about sweeping social and economic changes, the need to come up with new adventures that would enable them to remain in publication prevents superheroes from making any significant impact on the worlds they inhabit. Ironically, this need to remain “inconsumable” makes these costumed demigods some of the least effective and most powerless characters in popular culture.¹² Irreversible steps (such as establishing world peace) would age the character, bringing both the hero and the series one step closer to death. Most traditional superhero narratives are therefore doomed by the need for their constant circulation to becoming “never-ending soap operas” that are “interrupted by slug-fests,” while the characters are stuck in a world where every finite occurrence, including death, becomes temporary.¹³ During the 1980s, however, an alternative format of comic book storytelling has emerged to prominence under the banner of graphic novels, which provides at least a partial solution for the aforementioned discrepancies.

Although the expression itself has been around ever since the 1960s, the concept of graphic novels would not become popular until two decades later. To consider them a different medium than comic books would be far-fetched, since both are ultimately made up of the same content. Nevertheless, graphic novels are usually significantly longer than standard monthly or bimonthly comic book issues, and they tend to contain an entire narrative that can be read from beginning to end or an anthology of numerous shorter works, rather than only single installments of an overarching story that runs on for an indefinite amount of time.¹⁴ A number of critics have pointed out that the designation is simply a euphemism attempting to make comic books more marketable and erase some of the social stigma attached to them; however, since graphic novels have at least partially succeeded in this area, the term is hard to discredit.¹⁵ Perhaps most significantly, graphic novels have found a steady presence in major bookstores, which has allowed comic book content to move beyond the “superhero ghettos” of specialized comic book stores that have been their main domain ever

¹¹ Umberto Eco, “The Myth of Superman,” *Diacritics* 2.1 (Spring, 1972): 15.

¹² Eco 16.

¹³ Perhaps the most extreme examples of these never-ending stories are the deaths of superheroes themselves, which inevitably end in a resurrection, allowing the long-running series to continue. See Duncan, Smith 232-234.

¹⁴ Danny Fingeroth, *The Rough Guide to Graphic Novels* (London: Rough Guides Ltd., 2008) 3-5.

¹⁵ Author Daniel Reburn has articulated the position of the skeptics well by designating the term graphic novel “the literary equivalent of calling a garbage man a ‘sanitation engineer.’” Qtd. in Fingeroth 5.

since the 1970s.¹⁶ Ultimately, the most insightful definition appears to be that of comic book author Eddie Campbell, who claims that the “[g]raphic novel signifies a movement rather than a form. The goal of the graphic novelist is to take the form of the comic book, which has become an embarrassment, and raise it to a more ambitious and meaningful level.”¹⁷

Graphic novels are supposed to convince audiences and publishers that comic book content could stand for more than expressing power fantasies through the adventures of men in tights, but it were two superhero stories that have popularized the format immensely on the mainstream market during the 1980s, *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*.¹⁸ Both are frequently counted among the most significant Anglo-American comic books due to their unprecedented deconstruction of the superhero mythology and critical take on the United States in the 1980s.¹⁹ At the core of both narratives lies a wildly different answer to one of the most frequently discussed questions concerning the genre; whether superheroes are inherently totalitarian in their nature.²⁰ From the two, *The Dark Knight Returns* is clearly the more traditional superhero story, but it bears all the hallmarks of its famed creator Frank Miller, who became known for his ability to put a controversial spin on traditional characters.²¹ *The Dark Knight Returns* instantly breaks the limitations that Eco discusses in his essay by introducing an aging Bruce Wayne to the readers, a character who has retired from fighting crime as Batman. Despite a decade spent without vigilantism, the middle-aged billionaire never comes to terms with his new life. As Gotham City’s streets increasingly become dilapidated and overrun by a vicious gang calling themselves the Mutants, Wayne decides to don his cape again. Through a series of adventures, the aging Batman manages to dismantle the gang, avert city-wide anarchy, and when the White House starts perceiving him as a threat and sends none other than the legendary Superman to deal with him, Wayne

¹⁶ Duncan, Smith 68-70.

¹⁷ Qtd. in Fingerroth 6.

¹⁸ The publications initially appeared in several issues (twelve and four, respectively) before being released in single volumes as graphic novels.

¹⁹ Alex S. Romagnoli and Gian S. Pagnucci, *Enter the Superheroes: American Values, Culture, and the Canon of Superhero Literature* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013) 30.

²⁰ For two relatively recent polemics on the topic see Richard Cooper, “Superheroes Are a Bunch of Fascists,” *Salon*, Salon Media Group, Inc., 30 November 2013 <http://www.salon.com/2013/11/30/superheroes_are_a_bunch_of_fascists/> 19 May 2014 and Chris Yogerst, “Stop Calling Superheroes ‘Fascist,’” *The Atlantic*, The Atlantic Monthly Group, 3 December 2013 <<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/12/stop-calling-superheroes-fascist/281985/>> 19 May 2014.

²¹ Julian Darius, “A Place for Bold: Understanding Frank Miller,” *Sequart Organization*, Sequart Organization, 12 December 2011 <<http://sequart.org/magazine/8121/a-place-for-bold-understanding-frank-miller/>> 19 May 2014.

decides to fake his death and retreat underground, commencing the training of a new generation of crime-fighters.²²

Throughout *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman is constantly concerned with the limitations and the frailty of his body, but Miller's deconstruction of superheroes does not lie in questioning the caped crusader's physical prowess. Despite numerous interior monologues where Batman mentions his pain or fears of having a heart attack, he ultimately always triumphs over his adversaries during fights and continues performing exaggerated acrobatic bravados. The true tension lies in the crime-fighter's relationship with his city and its inhabitants. Miller furnishes his narrative with a remarkably rich background by including various television interviews and media reports that follow the public opinion of Gotham City on Batman's return. In this version of the dark metropolis, superheroes are both desperately needed and condemned, which is mirrored by the constant debates on whether Batman is a threat or a salvation for the city. Although Miller always juxtaposes two contrasting opinions and frequently makes fun of both sides, the rhetoric used by the vigilante's strongest detractors is clearly meant to appear as the more irresponsible, far-fetched and misguided stance. Dr. Bartholomew Wolper, a psychiatrist who has supposedly cured the mass-murdering Joker, claims that "Batman commits the crimes...using his so-called villains as narcissistic proxies,"²³ and labels him a "social disease" (66) as well as a "menace to society" (113), while another commentator accuses the caped crusader of being a "monstrous vigilante, striking at the foundations of our democracy -- maliciously opposed to the principles that make ours the most noble nation in the world" (65). Miller's story, however, strongly rejects vilifying Batman and Dr. Wolper's attacks are muted by his very own patient, the Joker, who murders his psychiatrist together with dozens of other people as soon as he is released from the mental hospital.

Despite Batman appearing as a necessary protector for Gotham City in the narrative of *The Dark Knight Returns*, he does have many negative characteristics that demonstrate the authoritarian side of superheroes, although Miller frequently seems to be glorifying the caped crusader. Throughout the story, the aging vigilante's manner of speech and the unforgiving way in which he trashes his adversaries strongly echoes the machismo of American popular

²² *The Dark Knight Returns* is a self-contained story that chronicles the end of a superhero's adventures. This, however, does not mean an end for the Batman franchise itself. From the 1980s onwards, comic book publishers have embraced the coexistence of multiple versions of the same characters. On one the hand, this makes it possible to exploit their commercial potential more, on the other hand it permits creators to freely explore different incarnations of traditional superheroes. See Duncan, Smith 78-79.

²³ Frank Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York: DC Comics, 1996) 47.

culture's 1970s and 1980s antiheroes. Batman addresses several of his young adversaries as "punk" (39), which instantly recalls Clint Eastwood's most iconic lines from the *Dirty Harry* series, while the crime-fighter's visual appearance resembles the ultra-masculine "heroes" of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone in their heydays.²⁴ Towards the end of the story, Gotham City descends into anarchy due to a massive energy failure and the caped crusader arrives on a black horse to rally the self-appointed lawmen calling themselves The Sons of Batman to keep order in the city, declaring "[t]onight, we are the law. Tonight, I am the law" (173). This is well in line with the ideology that Ronald Reagan has made into a national ethos during his office, which emphasized the "systematic interdependence between individual and nation as linked through the male body" both in the president's own persona and in 1980s Hollywood action heroes.²⁵ Like *Dirty Harry* or *Rambo*, Batman frequently needs to bend or break the law in Miller's story in order to deliver justice, which the author depicts as an ultimately noble and necessary act. Nevertheless, the comic book is far from praising Reagan's America, since the very need for the caped crusader is born out of the government's incompetence.

The political figures all appear ineffective and irresponsible throughout the narrative of *The Dark Knight Returns*. The mayor of Gotham City is depicted as a squeamish and weak figure, who is afraid to take a stance on Batman until the very last minute. His answer to the threat of the Mutants is negotiating with their leader, which swiftly concludes by the mayor dying on spot, after his throat is ripped out.²⁶ While there are numerous similarly unlikable characters representing the authorities in Miller's story, the most overt example of incompetent leadership is the comic book's caricature of Ronald Reagan himself. The 40th President of the United States appears as a carefree, perpetually grinning figure covered in American stars during his media appearances. Reagan places the entire nation into jeopardy after he orders Superman to attack the Soviet forces occupying Afghanistan, which initiates the launch of a nuclear warhead on the United States. As the nation's superhuman protector struggles to divert the bomb, Reagan announces the imminent threat on television already from a bunker, wearing a hazard suit. After the detonation occurs in a desert, however, the president emerges in the media again, triumphantly declaring that the Communist threat is "[n]othing we can't handle, folks. We're still America -- and I'm still president" (186). Thanks to this caricature, Miller's work demonstrates an unmistakable lack of trust in the

²⁴ Miller 34.

²⁵ Philippa Gates, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006) 128.

²⁶ Miller 91.

government, despite the fact that his Batman subscribes to the masculinity popularized by the Reagan era.

One of the most striking features of the narrative's anti-establishment attitude is the rendition of the United States' greatest fictional hero, Superman. While Batman is past his prime, the Kryptonian demigod continues to project the image of the ultimate boy-scout, which is clearly meant to appear kitschy even by the standards of the graphic novel's somewhat grandiose art style.²⁷ The superhero's virtuous image becomes strongly questioned by the end of the narrative, when the government orders him to neutralize Gotham's caped crusader in a final showdown. By exploiting Superman's weakness, Batman manages to defeat his foe and he delivers a crushing speech to the demigod symbolizing "truth, justice, and the American way."²⁸ The aging crusader reproaches the man of steel for always saying "yes to anyone with a badge -- or a flag" and at the end of their confrontation, before Wayne would seemingly succumb to a heart attack, he declares "[w]e could have changed the world...now...look at us...I've become a political liability...and you...you're a joke" (194). After Batman is revealed to be alive at the end of the story, Miller's tale valorizing vigilantism comes to full circle, since the caped crusader assembles his remaining allies to create an "army – to bring sense to a world plagued by worse than thieves and murderers" (199). With this final statement, the *The Dark Knight Returns* seems largely supportive of the actions of Batman and his followers, perhaps even promoting their violent, authoritarian, and machist crusade, which remains a problematic aspect of Miller's work.

The sympathetic antihero image that Batman gained thanks to Frank Miller became a quintessential motif for comic book characters from the 1980s onwards, and this narrative showing a radicalized caped crusader at odds with the authorities and society continues to affect even far less ambitious superhero tales.²⁹ Nevertheless, not all authors agreed with the sanctification of vigilantism seen in *The Dark Knight Returns*. During the 1980s, numerous British authors became famous by working in the American comic book industry, many of whom continue to be well-known even today.³⁰ Alan Moore, perhaps the most important auteur of the movement, succeeded by creating "a story about the whole world devaluing and

²⁷ Miller 118.

²⁸ Josh Grayson, "Truth, Justice, and the American Way," *Superman Homepage*, Superman Homepage, January 2000 <<http://www.supermanhomepage.com/comics/comics.php?topic=articles/josh-grayson1>> 19 May 2014.

²⁹ Duncan, Smith 72.

³⁰ Peter Anderson, "1986: The British Invasion, Part 1 – Grant Morrison in 1986: Batman," *Sequart Organization*, Sequart Organization, 17 April 2013 <<http://sequart.org/magazine/19399/1986-the-british-invasion-part-1-grant-morrison-in-1986-batman/>> 19 May 2014.

rejecting superheroes,”³¹ which surpassed even Frank Miller’s dark reworking of the genre and came to be known as “the most complex and ambitious superhero series ever published.”³² *Watchmen* takes place in an alternative version of 1980s America, but despite the drastic historical divergences, the graphic novel’s world feels hauntingly realistic compared to other superhero narratives. There are no costumed heroes with superpowers except the godlike being of Dr. Manhattan in Moore’s story, only individuals who have donned their capes and cowls in pursuit of fortune, fame, or a burning desire to change the world. By the events of *Watchmen* in 1985, however, vigilantism has become outlawed in the U.S. due to a backlash from the public and the police alike, which has forced superheroes to retire or continue their personal crusades as outlaws.

The narrative of Moore’s graphic novel centers around the former members of a once-famed group called Watchmen, most of whom have already moved past dispensing justice on the streets. After one of their old members is killed, however, several of the ex-vigilantes decide to resume their old careers and begin to investigate the murder, uncovering a great scheme that seeks to drastically alter the Cold War relations between the United States and the USSR. The graphic novel’s complex narrative can hardly be done justice to in a summary, but Moore’s deconstruction of superheroes and his attitude towards 1980s America is already well illustrated by the graphic novel’s main protagonists and its depiction of the United States’ government. While the *The Dark Knight Returns* has already touched on the incompetence of America’s leadership through Ronald Reagan’s careless actions, *Watchmen* makes this motif one of its core issues. In the graphic novel’s alternate history, Richard Nixon is already serving his fifth term as the President of the United States and the Cold War has escalated rather than stabilized during his presidency. Echoing the actions of Reagan in Frank Miller’s story, Nixon asks Dr. Manhattan to intervene in Vietnam. This leads to a swift victory over the Communist forces, but the demigod’s interference also intensifies the arms race, bringing the world one step closer to annihilation. The threat of a nuclear holocaust looms over Moore’s entire story, and *Watchmen* frequently contains imagery that recalls the apocalyptic visions of EC Comics’ “The 10th at Noon.”³³ Similarly to the bleak story contained in the *Weird Fantasy* series, Moore’s graphic novel is not concerned with taking a side in the ideological clash of the superpower; instead, it focuses on the potentially tragic outcome that the actions of either party could result in.

³¹ Romagnoli, Pagnucci 30-31.

³² Wright 272.

³³ Alan Moore, “Chapter VI,” *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 2008) 16-17.

It is this world full of uncertainty, devoid of clear good and evil, that the author places his demythicized versions of classic superheroes into, showing how problematic their very existence is in a more realistically rendered surroundings. Arguably, *Watchmen*'s strongest criticism of traditional archetypes is represented in the characters of Dr. Manhattan, Ozymandias, and Rorschach. The first could be easily read as an alternate incarnation of Superman. Originally a nuclear physicist, Dr. Manhattan has been transformed into a godlike being due to a scientific accident, gaining incredible powers which could be used to single-handedly change the course of history. Unlike the ultimate boy-scout, however, Dr. Manhattan feels increasingly distant from humanity, confessing that he is "tired of this world, these people [...] tired of being caught in the tangle of their lives."³⁴ Ironically, the incredible powers that he wields also stop Dr. Manhattan from making a positive impact on the world. Although he ends the war in Vietnam and advances technology immensely, the nuclear holocaust is still nigh. Dr. Manhattan's ability to see the future is also largely futile, since the demigod declares that he "can't prevent the future. To [him], it's already happening" ("Chapter IV" 16). The stoic Dr. Manhattan therefore ends up playing a surprisingly passive role in the overall story arc of *Watchmen*, knowing "how everything in this world fits together except people" ("Chapter IV" 16).

Since the only real superhero in Moore's graphic novel fails to deal with the threat of the nuclear war, it is another former member of the Watchmen who takes the task on himself. Originally described as a liberal, pacifist, self-made billionaire, and allegedly "the world's smartest man," Adrian Veidt is ultimately revealed to be the villain of the story.³⁵ The retired vigilante once known as Ozymandias is the graphic novel's disturbing take on a powerful individual with a god complex who decides to take the world's affairs into his own hands. Obsessed with the glory of ancient empires, Veidt identifies with Alexander the Great and dreams about uniting the globe by ending the threat of the Cold War. The beloved man known as a superhero who has never taken a single life, however, cannot reach his noble goal without committing an atrocity.³⁶ Believing that the relationship between the two superpowers is his Gordian Knot, Veidt decides to "frighten [the world] towards salvation with history's greatest practical joke" ("Chapter XI" 24). After spending years and a vast fortune on secret experiments, the former vigilante artificially manufactures a seemingly alien creature and teleports it to New York, killing half of the city's population by the shockwave that the

³⁴ Alan Moore, "Chapter IV," *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 2008) 25.

³⁵ Alan Moore, "Chapter XI," *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 2008) 3.

³⁶ Moore, "Chapter XI" 3.

transfer entails. Veidt's plan works and the horrified superpowers suspend their hostility, starting a collaboration to avert any possible extraterrestrial attacks in the future. Out of all the bleak stories that Moore's work contains, the narrative of Ozymandias is the most distressing one, warning readers against trusting their heroes and leaders to guard the world's faith, when perhaps they may end up laying waste to it.³⁷

The pessimism of *Watchmen* is enhanced also by the ideological opposite of Adrian Veidt, Rorschach. Driven by a down-to-earth vision typical of vengeful vigilantes obsessed with cleaning up the streets, Rorschach is a cross between a hard-boiled detective figure and Gotham City's caped crusader, but he lacks most of the seemingly heroic elements that Batman maintains even in Frank Miller's adaptation. Having traversed the underbelly of society for decades, Rorschach has been hardened by the horrors he witnessed and grew into a remorseless vigilante who does not value the life of his opponents. The former Watchmen is wanted for several homicides, holds radical conservative views, and is prone to paranoid delusions, yet he demonstrates an integrity that is singular in Alan Moore's graphic novel. Rorschach is in many ways the most traditional hero of the story, who still believes that "there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished," and swears that "[e]ven in the face of Armageddon, [he] shall not compromise in this."³⁸ This rigid moral code is reflected in the character's mask, which is covered by constantly shifting shapes resembling inkblot tests, but which contains no other shades except for black and white. At the end of *Watchmen*, however, Moore shows that Rorschach's dogmatic approach to justice is incompatible with reality, and after the uncompromising vigilante refuses to keep silent about his former colleague's plan, he becomes another dead body in the foundations of Veidt's "utopia." Unlike *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen* is left without an ultimate paragon who would embody the traditional superhero ethos. Instead, the comic book becomes an antithesis to the entire genre, reflecting its author's own skepticism and dislike for self-appointed champions of justice.³⁹

³⁷ Wright 273.

³⁸ Alan Moore, "Chapter I," *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics) 24.

³⁹ Alan Moore has been openly and increasingly critical about the superhero genre since *Watchmen*. Recently, the British author went as far as saying "I hate superheroes. I think they're abominations [...] Someone came up with the term graphic novel. These readers latched on to it; they were simply interested in a way that could validate their continued love of *Green Lantern* or *Spider-Man* without appearing in some way emotionally subnormal." The statement seems somewhat exaggerated considering that Moore himself created a highly successful Batman story titled *Batman: The Killing Joke* in 1988, which was clearly meant for older audiences; nevertheless, this blunt statement is a good example of the British author's frequent criticism of the comic book industry and its conventions. See Stuart Kelly, "Alan Moore: 'Why Shouldn't You Have a Bit of Fun While Dealing with the Deepest Issues of the Mind?'" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media Limited, 22 November 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/nov/22/alan-moore-comic-books-interview>> 19 May 2014.

The works of Alan Moore and Frank Miller prove that certain social and political concerns of the day may play a key role even in the highly fictionalized worlds that superheroes inhabit, and that these narratives are far from restricted to providing only disposable juvenile adventure stories. Both *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* acknowledge that the concept of superheroes is problematic and they count with the possibility that the world may not want them. The former comic book, however, ultimately justifies the need for vigilantes, while the latter completely rejects costumed and superhuman avengers, presenting them as a misguided and destructive force. The conflicted protagonists of these graphic novels have become such a resounding success that they have created a new benchmark for the entire genre. In the years following the publication of Miller's and Moore's works, publishers began resurrecting old characters who could be reworked into antiheroes, while the established figures have also taken a darker turn, frequently becoming remorseless vigilantes who were no longer bound by the moral code of sparing their enemies.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the superhero genre was soon hit by a wave of nostalgia for "The Golden Age," and flashback stories re-envisioning the birth of popular characters have become increasingly popular after the early 1990s.⁴¹

As successful as they are, the works of Miller and Moore have largely remained unchallenged by other mainstream publications. Despite the fact that the superhero genre was advanced considerably with the erosion of censorship and the possibilities lying in the graphic novel format, few mainstream works have managed to repeat the resounding success of *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. The increasing respect towards the possibilities lying in comic book storytelling has, however, meant a definite improvement for authors, who began to receive more lucrative proposals from publishers, while creator-owned franchises also became a viable alternative. This led to a further proliferation of genres and to the emergence of various independent publishing houses.⁴² Nevertheless, the comic book market crash in 1993 and the onslaught of the new media has considerably weakened the position of the industry by the early 2000s, which resulted in an increasing number of publishers seeking success for their franchises in other popular media.

⁴⁰ Duncan, Smith 73.

⁴¹ Duncan, Smith 78-79.

⁴² Duncan, Smith 73-75.

4. Transformation in the Wake of the New Millennium

The 1990s suggested that comic books would have a very hard time surviving the turn of the century. The medium's ability to adapt and its potential appeal to larger audiences, however, provided an unexpected solution for the declining industry. Thanks to various movie, television, and later video game adaptations, comic books managed to step into the new millennium as the conquerors of Western popular culture instead of a nearly extinct medium. The closing chapter of the thesis contains a brief overview of the recent developments in the comic book industry and discusses whether it is possible for large-scale Hollywood adaptations of popular franchises to raise daring questions instead of providing purely escapist thrills. A brief look at Christopher Nolan's recent Batman movies is included to support the latter claim, demonstrating that even bombastic comic book films have the ability to provoke heated debates.

Based on the presumption that new issues of popular comic book series will rapidly increase in their value and become collector's items, a significant number of speculators have started stockpiling comic books during the late 1980s and early 1990s. This has drastically boosted production; however, it soon became obvious that little profit could be made from these publications. Investors lost their interest and the comic book market quickly collapsed due to a sudden lack of buyers. During the 1990s, rapidly declining sales resulted in a large number of publishers and comic book stores going bankrupt.¹ Another important factor in the loss of audiences was the surge of new media. Cable television programming, video games, and shortly afterwards the internet have entirely transformed the landscape of Western youth entertainment, leaving comic books behind.² Combined with the struggling market, this led to the popularity of the medium hitting rock bottom. What initially seemed to be their doom, however, ultimately proved to be a tremendous opportunity for comic book publishers.

Even though the adaptations of comic books in various media have a long tradition, the early 2000s marked the beginning of their unprecedented conquest of Hollywood and television. The success of Bryan Singer's *X-Men* (2000) and Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002) has paved the way for a myriad of comic book movies in the past 14 years, turning them into one of the most profitable subgenres of contemporary blockbusters.³ Television has also seen its fair share of comic book material. *Smallville* (2001-2011) gathered a strong fan base with

¹ Raphael, Spurgeon 243.

² Wright 282-285.

³ Ian Gordon, et al., *Film and Comic Books* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) vii-viii.

its depiction of Clark Kent's journey to becoming America's greatest superhero, while *Arrow* (2012-) followed up on its success with a modern-day reiteration of the Green Arrow character.⁴ The adaptation of Robert Kirkman's post-apocalyptic comic book series, *The Walking Dead* (2010-), has achieved even greater success, establishing itself as the most-watched show in the history of basic cable television.⁵ Last but not least, after many lackluster attempts to gain a foothold for comic book characters on the video game market, *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (2009) and its sequel *Batman: Arkham City* (2011) became some of the highest-rated titles of the past years.⁶ Since most blockbuster movies, television series, and video games are made with an international audience in mind, these successes have not only ensured the survival of popular characters and franchises, but also significantly extended their cultural influence.⁷

Comic books themselves have, of course, profited from the immense popularity of various adaptations, but it seems unlikely that they could ever compete with the aforementioned markets. The estimated 84.5 million units of comic books that entered circulation in 2013 are still a far-cry from the figures over 190 million in the late 1960s, and long-running comic book series are not the cornerstones of the industry anymore.⁸ Publishers "are no longer in the publishing business: They're curators of, and incubators for, extremely valuable intellectual property."⁹ This also means that the primary platform of representation for popular franchises is no longer the domain where they originated. The barely 48 thousand copies of *Iron Man* sold in 2008¹⁰ can hardly match the influence of the character's silver screen incarnation from the same year, which has earned over 580 million dollars worldwide.¹¹ Even though superheroes continue to be the strongest segment of the publishing

⁴ Lincoln Geraghty, *The Smallville Chronicles: Critical Essays on the Television Series* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2001) 110.

⁵ James Lowder, *Triumph of the Walking Dead: Robert Kirkman's Zombie Epic on Page and Screen* (Dallas, TX: SmartPop, 2011) 100.

⁶ James Gilmore and Matthias Stork, *Superhero Synergies: Comic Book Characters Go Digital* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014)148-152.

⁷ Most highly successful comic book movies, such as *Marvel's The Avengers*, earn even more overseas (over 895 million dollars) than on the American market (623 million dollars), which is a clear sign that their influence and appeal is not limited to the US. See "Marvel's The Avengers," *Box Office Mojo*, International Movie Database <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=avengers11.htm>> 19 May 2014.

⁸ "Comic Book Sales by Year" *Comichron: The Comics Chronicles*, Comichron <<http://www.comichron.com/yearlycomicssales.html>> 19 May 2014.

⁹ Jonathan V. Last, "The Crash of 1993," *The Weekly Standard*, The Weekly Standard LLC, 13 June 2011 <http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/crash-1993_573252.html?page=3> 25 April 2014.

¹⁰ "Iron Man," *Comichron: The Comics Chronicles*, Comichron <<http://www.comichron.com/titlespotlights/ironman.html>> 19 May 2014.

¹¹ "Iron Man," *Box Office Mojo*, International Movie Database <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=ironman.htm>> 19 May 2014.

branch, comic book material attracting large audiences is no longer to be sought on the pages of monthly and bimonthly publications, but in movie theatres.¹²

Naturally, the migration to Hollywood has brought brand new challenges. While the censorship of comic books eroded during the 1970s, the content of their film adaptations is still heavily restricted by the rules of the Motion Picture Association of America. Comic book movies traditionally boast astronomical production budgets, filmmakers are therefore careful in tackling controversial issues which could endanger the commercial success of their product. With a few exceptions, most comic book adaptations work only with very light political and social context that by no means transcends Hollywood's cautious ideology.¹³ Even movies that do touch on such issues as terrorism and political corruption tend to eschew delving into them deeply in favor of bombastic action, lighthearted humor, and otherworldly villains. An apt example of this is the *Iron Man* movie series, which deals with the dangers of weapon manufacturing and international terrorism in its first part, but by the second installment, the title hero declares that he has "successfully privatized world peace," and Iron Man (Robert Downey, Jr.) goes on to fight increasingly formulaic and fantastic adversaries in his later adventures.¹⁴ Nevertheless, there are notable exceptions to the safe escapism of most superhero movies even in the highly constrained world of Hollywood blockbusters.

In contrast to most superhero films, Christopher Nolan's famed *The Dark Knight Trilogy* contains movies with an uncommonly heavy political and social subtext. The first installment, *Batman Begins* (2005), grounds the caped crusader in a setting surprisingly realistic for superhero movies. Instead of fantastic villains, the enemies of the brooding vigilante are comprised of corrupt policemen, members of the organized crime, and a fanatical sect that seeks to lay waste to the decadent Gotham City, which has become "a breeding ground for suffering and injustice."¹⁵ The second part of the trilogy, *The Dark Knight* (2008), focuses on the bitter fight of Batman (Christian Bale), Lieutenant James Gordon (Gary Oldman), and district attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart) to dismantle Gotham's mafia and to stop the rampaging Joker's (Heath Ledger) reign of terror. Frequently hailed as the best

¹² Today, most publishers already belong to larger media conglomerates. Marvel Entertainment, LLC, for instance, owns both the subsidiaries producing comic books and movie adaptations based on their characters, and the parent company itself was purchased by Walt Disney Co. for 4 billion dollars in 2009. See David Goldman, "Disney to Buy Marvel For \$4 Billion," *CNN Money*, Cable News Network, 31 August 2009 <http://money.cnn.com/2009/08/31/news/companies/disney_marvel/> 19 May 2014.

¹³ Elias Isquith, "Hollywood's Real Bias Is Conservative (but Not in the Way Liberals Often Say)," *The Atlantic*, The Atlantic Monthly Group, 9 January 2013 <<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/01/hollywoods-real-bias-is-conservative-but-not-in-the-way-liberals-often-say/266960/>> 19 May 2014.

¹⁴ *Iron Man 2*, dir. Jon Favreau, 2010, 17 min. 05 sec.

¹⁵ *Batman Begins*, dir. Christopher Nolan, 2005, 37 min. 25 sec.

comic book movie ever made, *The Dark Knight* ingeniously taps into the post-9/11 paranoia with a plot that resembles a postmodern thriller about mass panic, terrorism, and public surveillance rather than a superhero film.¹⁶ The echo of the Bush-Obama era's policies is arguably the strongest in the film's third act, when Batman resorts to using the technology at his disposal for turning every single cell phone in Gotham City into a microphone, which enables him to locate the Joker and thwart his plans. Even though the dark knight recognizes the machine's dangerous and unethical nature, and arranges its immediate self-destruction after his mission is complete, the film has sparked considerable debate on whether it endorses¹⁷ or criticizes America's "war on terrorism."¹⁸

The formidable conclusion of Christopher Nolan's trilogy, *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), may not boast a storytelling as masterful as the director's previous Batman movies, but it has become the most frequently discussed and challenged film of the saga. *Rises* features many themes that were explored in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, including the vigilante returning after years of absence into a city that no longer welcomes him. This time, the caped crusader's main adversary is Bane (Tom Hardy), a terrorist leader planning to destroy Gotham by detonating a nuclear device, but not before he instigates a false revolution and turns the city into the shining example of a failed state. Bane traps the vast majority of the city's law enforcement underground and swiftly assembles an army of incarcerated criminals and downtrodden citizens, claiming that his goal is to take "Gotham back from the corrupt, the rich, the oppressors of generations who have kept [the unprivileged] down with myths of opportunity."¹⁹ Batman eventually frees the policemen and leads them into a frontal assault on Bane's forces, successfully carrying the bomb outside the city limits before the explosion. Although the movie's screenplay was already finished and its production was well under its way during the Occupy Wall Street movement, many critics have drawn parallels between Bane's coup and the 2011 protests. One of the first steps of Batman's nemesis is besieging the city's financial district to manipulate the stock market, which has significantly contributed to the reading of the film as conservative.

For many, Christopher Nolan's Batman has cemented himself as a glorified reactionary icon because of his ultimate triumph over a terrorist leader who masquerades as a radical left-wing revolutionary. Likewise, the caped crusader's use of massive force to restore

¹⁶ Mathieu Deflem, *Popular Culture, Crime and Social Control* (Bingley: Emerald, 2010) 25.

¹⁷ Andrew Klavan, "What Bush and Batman Have in Common," *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 25 July 2008 <<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB121694247343482821>> 19 May 2014.

¹⁸ John Ip, "The Dark Knight's War on Terrorism," *Moritz College of Law*, The Ohio State University <http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/osjcl/Articles/Volume9_1/Ip.pdf> 19 May 2014.

¹⁹ *The Dark Knight Rises*, dir. Christopher Nolan, 2012, 99 min. 26 sec.

order to Gotham has linked him with the totalitarian image of superheroes, similarly to Frank Miller's popular graphic novel. In one of the early reviews, critic Andrew O'Hehir concluded that the authoritarian themes in Nolan's trilogy are unavoidable because it "simply pushes the Batman legend to its logical extreme, as a vision of human history understood as a struggle between superior individual wills, a tale of symbolic heroism and sacrifice set against the hopeless corruption of society."²⁰ Some went as far as interpreting the movie as a right-wing opus,²¹ while others have taken a more nuanced approach and saw it as an exploration of Western society's social anxieties,²² or have pointed out that the film's main source of inspiration is Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, that "simultaneously acknowledge[s] the injustices of the existing regime while suggesting that both the revolutionary and anarchic alternatives would be much, much worse."²³ The latter interpretation is strongly supported by the trilogy that repeatedly mocks the complacency and irresponsible behavior of upper classes, and the fact that in the third installment Bane himself is smuggled into Gotham City by a greedy billionaire who naively hopes that the terrorist leader could help him to even greater wealth. Regardless of whether *The Dark Knight Trilogy* is a conservative epic or not, the multifaceted reaction to the ideology driving Christopher Nolan's works proves that comic book movies can be the subject of thoughtful discussion and criticism, while their overwhelming commercial success suggests that such films can resonate with wider audiences just as well as more lighthearted summer movies.²⁴

Just when their days seemed to have been numbered, comic books managed to forge unexpected and highly profitable alliances with other media. With the overwhelming successes of the aforementioned adaptations, the survival of this once-struggling industry seems to be ensured. While the original format of comic books constitutes only a niche market compared to cinema, television, and video games, the contents of traditional publications and graphic novels still have a profound impact across all media. Most adaptations continue to treat classical comic books as their primary source of inspiration for

²⁰ Andrew O'Hehir, "'The Dark Knight Rises': Christopher Nolan's Evil Masterpiece," *Salon*, Salon Media Group, Inc., 19 July 2012

<http://www.salon.com/2012/07/18/the_dark_knight_rises_christopher_nolans_evil_masterpiece/> 19 May 2014.

²¹ Mark Fisher, "Batman's Political Right Turn," *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media Limited, 22 July 2012 <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/22/batman-political-right-turn>> 19 May 2014.

²² Slavoj Žižek, "The Politics of Batman," *New Statesman*, New Statesman, 23 August 2012

<<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/culture/2012/08/slavoj-%C5%BEi%C5%BEek-politics-batman>> 19 May 2014.

²³ Ross Douthat, "The Politics of 'The Dark Knight Rises'," *The New York Times*, New York Times Company, 23 July 2013 <<http://douthat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/23/the-politics-of-the-dark-knight-rises/>> 19 May 2014.

²⁴ Both the *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises* belong among the 10 highest-grossing movies of all time on the American market. See "Domestic Grosses," *Box Office Mojo*, International Movie Database <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/domestic.htm>> 19 May 2014.

both characters and storylines, which allows these publications to continue defining the way in which franchises are headed. If the past years have been any indication, however, comic books will endure as an integral part of popular culture even if their original format happens to fade away at one point. The transformation that the industry has witnessed in the past two decades may very well be a harbinger of even greater changes in the upcoming years. Comic books have proved that they are a remarkably versatile medium that can easily merge with other forms of popular entertainment and it is likely that their influence will continue to increase, contributing significantly to the ever-changing face of popular culture.

5. Conclusion

The journey and maturation of Anglo-American comic books since World War II has by no means been marked by linear progress. Circumstances have repeatedly forced the medium to reconstruct itself, which had both profoundly positive and negative effects on the contents of comic books. During the 1950s, the industry offered a wide variety of different genres, including crime stories, horror, and science fiction. The mainstream scene was enriched by comic book titles challenging the black-and-white ideology that characterized most of the industry's output. Such short stories as "In Gratitude," "The Whipping," and "Judgement Day," which appeared in the publications of EC Comics, openly attacked racism, while tales akin to "The 10th at Noon" stripped the Cold War of all jingoism and showed it as a road to complete destruction. This positive development was, however, held back by the conservatism and intolerance of Cold War America. The inception of strict content supervision in 1954 forced comic books to redefine themselves, which led to their creators revisiting superheroes. The return to these idealistic characters proved to be profitable for the industry, but it has also reaffirmed the position of comic books as a primarily adolescent entertainment. During the 1960s and 1970s, truly provocative titles were restricted to the underground scene, which did not attract a large enough audience and eventually disappeared. Even though the changing cultural climate in the United States gradually allowed superheroes to grow more complex and react to the increasing disillusionment with the country's policies, this dominant genre reached its truly self-conscious form only during the 1980s. Two landmark superhero titles, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*, that laid emphasis on coherent and mature storytelling instead of dragging out their narratives through an indefinite amount of issues, contributed significantly to the growing popularity of the graphic novel format, which has brought comic books some of their long-sought recognition.

Their rise in esteem, however, has not protected comic books from a severe recession that hit the industry during the 1990s. Plummeting sales drove publishers to attempt a radical transformation of their business model, which drastically altered the situation of traditional comic books in the past two decades. Whereas monthly and bimonthly publications were the primary focus of the industry until the 1990s, they have become much less significant after popular franchises were successfully adapted to the silver screen, television, and ultimately video games. This success may have not come hand in hand with a massive revitalization of the publishing branch, but it has extended the influence of comic books to vastly more

popular realms of entertainment, allowing them to reach far beyond American audiences. The extent to which comic book adaptations are willing or able to engage with mature and provocative themes, however, remains largely dependent on the content restrictions that these new media face and the risks that their creators are willing to take. While this remains a considerable challenge, their ability to adapt has always been the saving grace of comic books, and judging by the overwhelming influence that they had on popular culture in recent years, it may very well ensure their continuous survival for many decades to come.

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