CAPED COMMODITIES AND MASKED MEMORIES:

THE AMERICAN COMIC BOOK INDUSTRY, COLLECTIVE MEMORY, AND THE

SUPERHERO

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Communication Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Media Studies) at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

March 2005

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between collective memory, history and popular culture as it pertains to the American superhero comic. It examines some of the reasons behind and ways that American comic book publishers change their superhero character properties over time. This entails looking at the consequences of the ownership of character properties to the industry and the resulting economic impetus to alter their characters to both resonate with contemporary audiences and to keep them accessible to new readers.

Despite these changes, those aspects of the superhero comic that are changed by this economic drive rarely disappear. Rather, comic book history continues to play a vital role in comic book fandom. Thus, this thesis examines the development and role of comic book reprints in the industry and comic book fandom. In a similar vein, it explores the role that knowledge of a character's—or a publisher's stable of characters'—diagetic history plays in contemporary superhero narratives and how such knowledge is disseminated. Both of these studies argue that knowledge and appreciation of past comic books play a vital role in contemporary comic book narratives and fandom.

Finally, this thesis examines how discarded elements of past comic books come into play as allusions in later superhero narratives. This thesis questions if such allusions have been used as a means to represent the historical moments that the alluded to elements of past comic books are associated with. Ultimately this thesis argues that such allusive comics are one of the many textual resources that some theorists consider vital to understanding contemporary collective memory.

Acknowledgements

I would first and foremost like to thank my parents without whom this thesis would not be possible. I would also like to thank Dr. Charles Acland for supervising this thesis and shepherding it through its many transformations, mutations, and permutations. Thanks also go out to the other members of my committee—Dr. Martin Allor and Dr. Matt Soar—for their support, excellent comments, and kind words. I must give Jeny Nussey a giant thank you for her endless support and patience. Special thanks to Sheelah O'Neill for helping me out whenever I found myself in a jam. Finally a round of applause goes to my friends in Montreal, Calgary, and Okotoks for keeping me sane and listening to the odd insane rant about this monstrosity.

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Introduction

This thesis will attempt to think through and establish aspects of the relationship between popular culture, memory and history through the example of the American superhero comic. This will entail examining some of the ways that pop culture, memory and history overlap and fold into each other and the specific forms this takes in the contemporary comic scene. In order to do so, however, it is necessary to establish how and why American comic books have changed over time along with how older texts and knowledge of comic book history continue to circulate. Building upon this foundation, this thesis will examine how allusions to and uses of older media images and styles can be used in later texts as a historical shorthand one way that our knowledge of popular culture can overlap with a more general sense of the past.

Before we continue, however, it may be of some interest to discuss how this thesis came about. Originally this project was conceived of as a way to write about one of my favorite ongoing superhero teams, the Legion of Super-Heroes, and the effects that a series of revisions to their continuity has had.[1] Never an 'A' or even 'B' list group, the Legion has nevertheless had a long history punctuated by fairly substantial changes to the group and the periodicals it appeared in since its first appearance in 1958.

The team, although best known for clean-cut teen superheroes with names like Lightning Lad, Shadow Lass, Cosmic Boy and Saturn Girl, also has the dubious distinction of having had its continuity radically revised more often than any other group of comic book characters. Indeed, since the mid-1980's it has had its back story

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[1] As will be discussed further in the first chapter, comic book continuity is basically the diagetic history of a series' character or characters as established by published stories.

substantially changed on no less than four occasions, including two total reboots that effectively jettisoned, in the first instance, nearly forty years of stories. Yet, despite these efforts to wipe away the Legion's history to make it more accessible to new readers it never really seemed to go away.

Instead, stories published in the wake of these revisions and reboots were often in a constant dialogue with those they replaced. Usually this took the form of either retellings, with some variations, of 'classic' legion stories or more subtle references to characters, costumes, and stories that had been erased from the official diagetic history of the Legion. Although it wasn't necessary for new readers to 'get' these nods to the team's discarded pasts, for those in the know or even those who wanted to learn more about the Legion's history, they provided another level upon which these new narratives could be enjoyed.

These references to the Legion's history were almost certainly, at least in part, an attempt by DC to not totally alienate the long term readership of the team's adventures. Indeed, the Legion's fandom is noted as one of the most devoted and involved subsets of comic book fans.[2] It is therefore unsurprising that the company made some gestures—not the least of which was the inclusion of the Legion to the roster of characters and titles who had their early stories reprinted as part of DC's high-quality, and high-priced *Archive* line—to Legion fans after having changed or officially erased the continuity of their beloved team of super teens.

What interested me about this state of affairs was that these references to and retellings of Legion history were often as much a commentary upon the time in which

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[2]Matthew J. Pustz notes the devotion of Legion fans on p. 82 of his *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999).

they were originally written as they were the actual words and pictures in the source

material. Understanding how these allusions to the Legion's history could engage with a

broader sense of our own past quickly became the central question I wanted to address in

this thesis. To a certain extent this focus also comes from the more general realization

that—regardless of whether or not old comic books, television programs or films are

regarded as valid historical sources by professional historians—imagery and other

aesthetic elements from old media texts are commonly deployed by the creators of later

texts to stand in for a perceived essence of the context in which they were created. In

other words, whether we like it or not, for many of us allusions to and parodies of

television programs like *Leave it to Beaver* or *The Donna Reed Show* provide the

framework within which we understand and imagine life in the American Suburbs in the

1950's. Rather than describe this state of affairs as a symptom of post, super, or regular

modernity, this thesis is an attempt at exploring some of the conditions necessary for the

proliferation of texts that draw on our memories of popular culture to construct a broader

understanding of the past.

To do this I will turn your attention to the American superhero comic, a genre

that, as warily noted by scholars like Geoff Klock and Matthew J. Pustz, has increasingly

become characterized by dense intertextual references to its own past.[3] I will, within this

introduction, briefly sketch the odd relationship to time and memory characterizing the

superhero genre that was first observed by Umberto Eco. Hopefully this will give a sense

of why the superhero genre is a fertile site to study the relationship between popular

culture and collective memory. I will then provide a short history of comic books since

the rise of the direct market, or, in other words, since it moved from being a mass medium aimed at children to a niche product that targets a more adult demographic. Finally, I will set down the goals and methodologies of the chapters to follow.

The American comic book industry has a complex relationship with time and memory. Until relatively recently, comic books were a highly ephemeral commodity: inexpensive to purchase, cheaply printed on low quality paper, often owned by children and adolescents (whose capacity for destruction cannot be underestimated) and produced in great quantity. They were something to be used, abused and disposed of: a low quality product filled with prose and pictures assigned an equally low place on the cultural totem pole. On the other hand, at least for the most successful characters, there is something timeless about them. More precisely, many of the characters, (Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman or Spiderman for example), have, in some ways, been taken outside of time, their aging and deaths prevented by the intervention of their entrepreneur owners who instead choose to place them in an eternal present.

Taken together with their superhuman abilities and garish costumes, this failure to feel the ravages of time has lent these characters to comparisons with mythical figures of yore. Indeed, comic book characters have often been compared to mythic figures, within the academy this is evident from a range of works like Bill Boichel's "Batman: Commodity as Myth," Umberto Eco's "The Myth of Superman," or Richard Reynolds', *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*. However, as pointed out by Umberto Eco in his seminal essay "The Myth of Superman," one point of divergence between superheroes and the heroes of classical myth lies in their relationship with time.

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[3] Indeed, this tendency to draw heavily upon its past is one of the most frequent criticisms of writers who feel that mainstream comics are increasingly dooming the entire medium. See: Klock, Geoff, *How to Read*

For Eco, one of the defining features of mythic characters is that their stories are always told in past tense, they are events that happened in the past, no matter how remote, and are largely already known to the audience who hears them. With the rise of modern theatre and the novel a new type of 'typical' character and storytelling emerges premised on the audience not knowing what is going to happen next and that the characters experience time much like their readers, that is to say they are born, gain experience and die. In other words modern characters are inevitably 'consumed' (Eco's term) by the plots of which they are a part.[4] Thus, some of Eco's fascination with American comic book characters stems from their unusual relationship with time which seems, to him, to be an odd hybrid between the mythical structure of old infused with modern conventions.

In Eco's words, "The mythological character of comic strips finds himself in this singular situation: he must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable (this is what happens to Superman); but, since he is marketed in the sphere of a 'romantic' production for a public that consumes 'romances,' he must be subjected to a development which is typical, as we have seen, of novelistic characters."[5] Thus, as a result of their being set in the present and trying to conform to novelistic conventions of a linear life while at the same time attempting to keep these characters unchanging archetypes, Eco finds a convoluted and paradoxical relationship to temporality in American comic books.

Superhero Comics and Why, (New York: Continuum, 2002) p. 4 and Pustz, p. 143.
[4] Eco, p. 109-110.
[5] Ibid, p. 110.

This elastic relationship to time is only exacerbated by the then fairly rigid genre convention of superhero comics of each issue constituting a discrete episode in its featured character's career with little to no reference to previous adventures and an equally minimal impact on future issues. As Eco puts it,

> the stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate-of which the reader is not aware at all- where what happened before and what has happened after appear extremely hazy. The narrator picks up the strand of the event again and again, as if he had forgotten to say something and wanted to add details to what had already been said.[6]

Indeed, Eco finds it telling that events like Clark Kent and Lois Lane marrying or having a child are only conceivable within specially framed and explicitly labeled "Imaginary Stories," indicating both a concession to the pressures of novelistic character development while keeping Superman timeless by telling readers that it doesn't really count.

But Superman has gotten married. Perhaps only for a decade of his sixty-plus years in print, but he has taken the plunge and is another step closer to consuming himself as Eco described. Comic books have changed pretty dramatically since his article was first published in 1961 and were, indeed, changing as he wrote it. The changes contemporaneous with Eco's work were largely due to the rise and influence of Marvel comics in the 1960's.[7] The two key changes that Marvel's successes had on the industry, as far as this thesis is concerned, were an increasing use of serial narrative techniques and

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[6] Ibid, p. 114.

[7] Although he doesn't refer to them in his section on comic book time, Eco does seem aware that the, then, recent Marvel publications were, in at least some respects, substantially different than their DC counterparts. See p. 122.

a greater rooting of their characters in contemporary life. Thus, a Marvel reader in the 1960's and early 1970's could conceivably have followed Spiderman's literary career from his inception in 1962 as a bespectacled square persecuted by slang talking teenagers to a confident college student wary of a friend's use of LSD in 1971, with many a failed romance and sticky situation along the way.

One could say that, since Eco wrote this essay, the novelistic elements of the American superhero comic book have largely won the tug of war with their mythic counterparts. However, while comic books have become increasingly serial in their narratives, and perhaps had to in order to remain viable entertainment products, the elastic relationship with time Eco described has persisted. Doubtless, this is due more to the drive by their publishers to continue profiting from their character properties than any desire on the part of their creators to fashion their characters as modern myths. Nevertheless, the continuing tension between the tendency of comic books to be increasingly novelistic—serial, and grounded in contemporary society—in order to sell to contemporary audiences, on the one hand and timeless—unaging and therefore always potentially profitable—on the other has had some interesting effects on the genre/industry's relationship to history and memory. Indeed, the tension between these two poles will inform the entirety of this work.

However, before we can begin the meat of this thesis it may be helpful to provide a bit of context for the contemporary comics scene. For instance, it is now well established that the comic book industry, in terms of content, sales and the role of the creator, has changed dramatically since the late 1970's and that the audience is far older.[8]

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[8] See *Comic Book Nation* or Chapters 4, 5 and 7 of Bongco, Mila's *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books,* (Garland Publishing: New York, 2000), or Chapters 1

Nevertheless, it will be useful to go over a few points of this narrative. In particular it will be necessary to establish the importance of the emergence of the direct market, the perceived change in comic book readership, and the shifting stature of the creator within the industry. After this has been done, I will examine some of the creator-oriented discourse that has emerged since the transformation of the comics scene in the 1980's.

The first shift that is important to note in order to understand contemporary comics is the emergence and eventual dominance of the direct distribution market. In 1974, comic book convention organizer Phil Seuling began the direct distribution system. This system was designed for the growing number of comic book specialty shops to enable them to cater more to comic book fandom than newsstands and 'mom and pop' grocery stores; the established point of purchase for comics up until that point.[9] For fans and merchants alike, the advantages of direct distribution over the newsstands were fairly obvious. Under the traditional system, comic book companies determined how many copies of various books newsstands would receive, while under direct distribution comic book shops order, from a distribution company, as many copies of a given title that they feel their customers will purchase. Further, for the comic book companies themselves, the direct market represented a way to save capital as they were obligated to take back unsold comics from newsstands regardless of whether or not they were adequately displayed. Through the direct market, all sales to comic book shops are final.

It's important to note that, in the long run, the purely economic benefit of the direct distribution system has become questionable. There has been a sharp decline in

and 2 of *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media*, Pearson and Uricchio eds, (Routledge: New York, 1991), see also Chapter 4 of Brooker, Will *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*, (Continuum: New York, 2000)

readership since mid-1990's. In the twenty-five years between the system's introduction and 1999, newsstands and other traditional venues, in the case of Marvel Comics, have gone from accounting for all of their comic sales to a mere 9%. This would not necessarily be cause for alarm except for the fact that the total number of comic shops are declining.[10] This, along with a sharp increase in the price of paper and other essential supplies for the publishing of comics and stiff competition from video games and the internet for consumer dollars, is seen to be among the reasons for this decline.[11] Indeed, since 1995 it has become fairly commonplace to hear the comic book industry referred to as being in crisis, if not dying.

However, beyond the economic and structural changes brought about indirectly by the direct distribution system there have been other, equally important, changes. Possibly the most important has been the shift in target audiences from a mass audience of adolescents and children to comic book fans, described by Dennis O'Neil as, on average, "twenty-four, male, and very literate."[12] Unsurprisingly, this rethinking of the target audience for superhero comic books can be considered to be, at least partially, responsible for a shift in their content. The impact of direct distribution on this aspect of comics is fairly straightforward. Books targeted at this market were often published without the Comic Book Authority's seal of approval and distributed solely through specialty shops, usually with the tantalizing (for this adolescent) label "suggested for

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[9] Boichel, Bill, "Batman: Commodity as Myth," in *The Many Lives of Batman*, p. 15 or Bongco, p. 129-131.

[10] Ellis, Warren, *Come In Alone*, (San Francisco: AIT/Planet Lar, 2001), p.190.

[11] See Bongco, p. 191-7 or Raviv, Dan *Comic Wars: How Two Tycoons Battled over the Marvel Comics Empire- And Both Lost* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001), p. 60.

[12] Pearson and Uricchio, "Notes from The Batcave: An Interview with Dennis O'Neil," in *The Many Lives of Batman*, p. 29. Interestingly, O'Neil claims this information is based upon some market research done by DC comics and direct market distribution companies.

mature readers" or, in more recent years, under the adult oriented imprints of the large

companies (Vertigo or Wildstorm at DC for instance or Marvel Max at Marvel Comics).

This shift towards more complex and adult themed superhero comics is generally

linked to the publication of Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986 and

Alan Moore's *Watchmen* in 1987, although earlier, less noteworthy, books were

published.[13] While much has been written about this trend, and these authors in

particular, for the purposes of this introduction it is sufficient to say that the move

towards complex superhero narratives is alive, well, and an increasingly vital part of

comic book publication. Indeed, it can be argued, and is by Geoff Klock in *How and Why*

to Read Superhero Comics, that these then iconoclastic works have spawned a tradition

as entrenched as that which they were written against; a tradition which the books I will

be discussing in portions of this thesis can be seen as falling within.

An important feature of the growth of this type of superhero comic, and the

critical discourse that continues to spring up around it, is the attention paid to their

creators. In part a response to the growing importance of fandom as the target market for

their products, DC comics, as part of their bid to regain some of the market share they

had lost to Marvel in the 1970's, introduced a royalty plan in 1981 in order to attract

popular creators.[14] This act, although not as beneficial to most creators as many would

like, can be seen as the beginning of the emergence of a star system within comics.

Throughout the 1980's a relatively small group of comic auteurs emerged: Frank Miller,

Chris Claremont, Alan Moore, John Byrne, George Perez. These authors' names often

became featured nearly as prominently as a given comic's feature character upon their

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[13] See: Barr, Mike W., and Bolland, Brian *Camelot 3000* (DC Comics, December 1982-April 1985), the series was 12 issues in length.

covers. Critically acclaimed, popular with the fans and often given greater creative freedom (not to mention compensation) than other creators; these writers and artists created the canonical works of the contemporary comics scene and remain among those discussed in critical discourse about comics.

Indeed, Warren Ellis, a 'star' comic writer and comic industry critic who emerged in the 1990's goes so far as to claim that creators are now more important to the comic consumers than characters or brand preference. He states that

> once, the characters were the most important part of a book to its audience. Then, the publisher's brand became paramount. Later, a schism emerged, where for every person who aligned themselves with a publisher, another aligned themselves with a particular family of books from a publisher. All these identification systems have pretty much gone the way of the dodo with the new century. But a new alignment is emerging. More and more stores are racking their books not by publisher, nor alphabetically by title, but by creator.[15]

Even if one is not entirely inclined to position creators as the exclusive reason a comic fan now purchases a given title, it is clear that they have become one of the crucial forces driving the medium.

As mentioned above, paralleling the development of the comic book industry—from the production of mass-marketed books predominantly targeted at minors to a niche product with literary pretensions aimed at more adult, and presumably more literate, fans—has been the emergence of a critical literature on comic books. In terms of the

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[14] Wright, Bradford, *Comic Book Nation* p. 261-2.

superhero genre, a veritable boom in academic work began in and around the release of

the 1989 *Batman* film. The critical anthology *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical

Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, edited by Roberta E. Pearson and William

Uricchio, was released in 1991 and featured a selection of essays ranging in perspective

from journalistic interviews of acclaimed creators, to textual and political economic

analyses of Batman. Since then, academic work on American superhero comics has

produced a fairly large and varied body of literature.

Despite this variety some of the contours of this critical discourse must be

mapped out. Some of the notable approaches to the superhero comic included studies on

the representation of race and gender within the genre, such as Lillian Robinson's

Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes or Jeffery A. Brown's "Comic Book

Masculinity and the New Black Superhero," and ideological criticism of superhero

narratives like Matthew Wolf-Meyer's, "The World Ozymandias Made: Utopias in the

Superhero Comic, Subculture, and the Conservation of Difference."[16] Examinations of

comic book fandom, like Matthew J. Pustz's *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True

Believers*, studies of the political economy of the industry, such as Matthew P.

McAllister's "Ownership Concentration in the U.S. Comic Book Industry," and works on

the history of the comics, like David Park's "The Kefauver Comic Book Hearings as

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[15] Ellis, p. 78. I should note that I, as a comic book consumer, have yet to find a store laid out in this fashion.

[16] See: Robinson, Lillian S. *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes* (New York: Routledge, 2004), Brown, Jeffery A, "Comic Book Masculinity and the New Black Superhero," in the *African American Review* Vol. 33, #1, Spring 1999 p. 25-42, Singer, Marc, "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race" in the *African American Review* Vol. 36, #1, Spring 2002, p.107-119, or Williams, J.P., "All's Fair in Love and Journalism: Female Rivalry in *Superman*, in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 24, #2, Fall 1990 p. 103-112. For an example of political criticism rooted more in the oeuvres of prominent creators than representation see: Wolf-Meyer, Matthew, "The World Ozymandias Made: Utopias in the Superhero Comic, Subculture, and the Conservation of Difference," in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 36, #3, Winter 2003, p. 497-517.

Show Trial: Decency, Authority and the Dominated Expert," are also common.[17] Finally

there have been analyses of the superhero grounded in psychoanalytic, mythological, and

structuralist theory.[18] And this only reflects the work that has been done on American

superhero comics and ignores the literature on comics created in other countries or that

are situated in a different generic or industrial context. As one can see, I am not writing in

a vacuum.

For the most part, the comic-specific academic works I will be utilizing over the

course of this thesis fall into the historical, political economic and fan-oriented camps;

although some of the analyses that directly address intertextuality and memory within

superhero comics will also be employed. All too often it seems that works situated in

these different perspectives tend to be written in near isolation from each other. Thus it is

rare for more literary theory driven analyses of the content of superhero comics to draw

upon the insights of those scholars who have researched the political economy of

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[17] See: Pustz, Matthew J., *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999) or Brown, Jeffrey A., "Comic Book Fandom and Cultural Capital," in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 30, #4, Spring 1997, p. 13-32 for work on fans. See: McAllister, Matthew P, "Ownership Concentration in the U.S. Comic Book Industry," in *Comics and Ideology*, McAllister, Sewell and Gordon eds, (New York: Peter Lang, 2001) or, McAllister, Matthew P., "Cultural Argument and Organizational Constraint in the Comic Book Industry," in the *Journal of Communication* Vol. 40, #1, Winter 1990, p. 55-71. For recent work on comic history see: Nyberg, Amy Kiste, *Seal of Approval : The History of the Comics Code*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), Wright, Bradford W., *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), or Park, David "The Kefauver Comic Book Hearings as Show Trial: Decency, Authority and the Dominated Expert," in *Cultural Studies* Vol. 16, #2, March 2002, p. 259-288.
[18] Some comic oriented work grounded in mythological, structuralist and psychoanalytic theory: Reynolds, Richard, *Superheroes : A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), or Lang, Jeffrey S., and Trimble, Patrick "Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow? An Examination of the American Monomyth and the Comic Book Superhero," in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 22, #3, Winter 1988, p. 157-173, Brody, Michael, "Batman: Psychic Trauma and Its Solution," in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 28, #4, Spring 1995, p. 171-178, or Gabilliet, Jean-Paul, "Cultural and Mythical Aspects of a Superhero: The Silver Surfer 1968-1970," in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 28, #2, Fall 1994, p. 203-213.

American comic books and vice versa.[19] One of the goals of this thesis is to find a way to make these different approaches speak to each other in a productive manner, ideally by demonstrating their inter-relatedness and without privileging one set of theories and methodologies as inherently superior to all others.

This introduction has sketched some of the foundation upon which the rest of this thesis will built. This has consisted of discussing some the developments in the American comic book industry's recent past, including the emergence and dominance of the direct market, the rise of largely adult fans as the dominant market for superhero comics, and the increasingly important role of star creators in the industry. We have also examined some of the critical literature on American comic books that has emerged, focusing upon Umberto Eco's seminal writings on the nature of time within superhero comics. Although somewhat dated, Eco's twin observations on the need of superhero characters to remain essentially the same while simultaneously existing in the modern world nevertheless inform some aspects of the chapters that follow.

The first chapter, entitled, "The Secret Identities of Comic Book Publishers: Superheroes as Character Properties," will try to bring together two fairly disparate trends in writings on comic books. The first such trend is the tendency to focus purely on the comic book industry as a business predicated upon licensing out characters to appear across a variety of products and media. The second trend is to focus purely on the medium of comics in and of itself with an emphasis on applying literary analytical techniques to the great works by the great creators. It is the intention of this chapter, using a variety of sources, to try and bring these two discourses into communication with

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[19] An exception to this is Matthew P. McAllister's, "Cultural Argument and Organizational Constraint in the Comic Book Industry." This article does try to loosely link the profit motive of the comic book industry

each other and to attempt to find a point between them that may be a useful jumping off point for future study.

The second chapter, "Recycled Wonder: The Commodification of Comic Book History," will look at the changing perceptions of reprinted comic books between the 1960's and the present. This will hopefully make clear that despite the commercial pressures to keep the diagetic histories of superhero characters—a point that will be elaborated upon in the first chapter—older material has, since the 1960's, been repackaged and circulated amongst comic book readers. Nevertheless, this chapter will try to illustrate that perception of reprint books—including who they should be marketed to and how—has changed dramatically. Ultimately, this chapter will make the argument that the emergence of comic book fans as the primary audience for such products and the importance placed upon knowing comic book history within fandom has promoted the emergence in the last fifteen years of high-priced and apparently high-quality reprint collections.

The third chapter, "Superpowered Pedagogy," will address the techniques and products designed to familiarize new readers with the detailed histories, backstories, and conventions of the superhero genre. Drawing on work on textual and genre competency, this chapter will look at how, despite periodic efforts to streamline mainstream superhero books, a great deal of knowledge about the characters, their histories, and the genre's conventions are continually at play in contemporary comics. Proceeding from this, I will then look at some of the narrative techniques and specially designed products that the industry markets or, in many cases, fans create to both educate newcomers to the genre

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to changes in their output over the years.

and to provide more knowledgeable readers with a greater depth of knowledge about the genre and the industry.

Finally, the fourth chapter "Tarnishing the Silver Age: Comics and Collective Memory," will attempt to bring together the work from the previous two chapters into a discussion of how imagery from comic book history is often deployed to evoke certain feelings and ideas about the context in which they were created. Placing emphasis on the necessity of both change over time and awareness of these changes for such works, I will link up some of the discourses on collective memory with recent representations of one of the 'great' eras of comics: the Silver Age. In the process I hope to explore some of the possibilities and limitations of this intersection between our memories of cultural texts and forms and a broader understanding of the past.

Taken together, the individual chapters of this thesis will provide a better understanding of the relationship between our memories and knowledge of popular culture and our broader sense of North American society's past. I have attempted to minimize broad theoretical assumptions about modern, post-modern or super-modern society in favor of a slightly more concrete analysis of how ideas about, and experiences of, pop culture past circulate in contemporary comic culture. Ultimately, I hope that this thesis will be of use to individuals interested in more than just men and women in spandex, capes and masks... but hey, that's in here too.

Chapter One

The Secret Identities of Comic Book Publishers:

Superheroes as Character Properties

Commercial Anglophone comics are working against a massive drag factor in terms of breadth and purity of vision and other yardsticks of quality or cultural importance. A vast amount of the art form's energies are turned towards keeping the hundred or so company-owned continuing superhero comics alive... It's the hypnotic lie that has otherwise intelligent and talented people providing life support for old ideas, not for short periods to establish themselves in a harsh marketplace, but for years on end.
-Warren Ellis, creator of *Planetary* and *Transmetropoltian*, in **Come In Alone**, (San Francisco: AIT/Planet Lar, 2001), p.16-17.

[Ron] *Perelman said that he would take Marvel far beyond the sleepy and small business of publishing comic books. "It is a mini-Disney in terms of intellectual property," he said. "Disney's got much more highly recognized characters and softer characters, whereas our characters are termed action heroes. But at Marvel we are now in the business of the creation and marketing of characters."*
-Ron Perelman, former owner of Marvel Comics, as quoted in **Comic Wars: How Two Tycoons Battled over the Marvel Comics Empire- And Both Lost** by Dan Raviv, (New York: Broadway Books, 2001), p. 12.

The two quotations above illustrate, in many respects, two lines of thought about comic books and the superhero genre that seem to run throughout both the industry itself and much of the critical work upon the subject. On the one hand you have the

impassioned criticism of one of the medium's top creators, both in terms of sales and acclaim, decrying the exploitation of creators by industry giants along with the medium's lack of prestige and diversity. Critics along this line, Ellis included, tend to wish for comic books to become a legitimate medium: embracing a wide range of genres, being creator driven, and judged by the same criterion as similar art forms like film or novels. On the other, you have a former owner of Marvel Comics selling the virtues of the company to potential investors. In extreme cases, this line of reasoning has a tendency to view the characters and content of superhero comic books as empty symbols owned by large corporations which can be plastered on products ranging from pajamas to potato peelers in an indiscriminate quest for profit.

This chapter outlines the contours of these two approaches, and the tensions between them, to understanding the superhero. This chapter will attempt to recontextualize the superhero and, to a certain extent, character properties in general. I argue that it is necessary to see them as more than components of a genre of comic book, film and television narratives, as properties which large corporations seek to maximize exploitation of, or as the pure creations and tools of gifted writers, artists and directors. It is precisely because they are constituted in the space created by these competing forces that I argue that contemporary superhero narratives are interesting. Recent revisionist superhero narratives, in particular, can productively be seen as the result of a combination of these factors. Following this, I argue that revisions to superhero character properties have become an essential part of the comic book industry, as it attempts to keep its characters attractive to contemporary audiences and potential licensees, especially the film and television industries.

In order to make this argument, this chapter will examine several aspects of this phenomenon. This will begin with considering the creator oriented discourse which has emerged in the wake of the changes to the industry, detailed in my introduction, that have occurred since the1980's. I will comment on this discourses' critique of the mainstream, American, comic book industry and explore its limitations. Secondly, I will consider the attractiveness of the revisionist movement within superhero comic books to the corporations that publish them. To do so, I argue that it is useful to focus on the concept of superheroes as 'character properties' and will thus trace out the emergence of the trademark laws that enable this and question the extent to which the publication of comic books is really the business of a comic book publisher. The final section of this chapter illustrates these tendencies by way of an example that looks at how creative talents and industry interests can clearly converge in instances of genre revision. For this section I will use Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch's *The Ultimates* as an example of how an attempt to revitalize certain Marvel character properties by 'star' talent can result in a truly revisionist, and very interesting, genre piece.

Far from the anonymous figures who worked in the sweat shops of the Golden Age of comics (roughly the late 1930's until the late 1940's) creators have become, perhaps, the central focus for fan, industrial and critical discourse about the medium. One merely has to open up a recent issue of *Wizard* magazine, a periodical that can be considered the *Premier* of comic books, to read about the latest lucrative exclusive contract a given creator has signed with a publisher or an interview with them about their latest project. Indeed, the growth of creator-owned or creator-participant characters, where the creator maintains some financial and creative ownership over a character, in

titles produced by the two major publishers is testimony to their perceived importance to the medium and its fans.

Unsurprisingly, this is reflected in much of the critical writing about comics. While this tendency is present in some of the earlier critical work on comic books, most notably the interviews with Dennis O'Neil and Frank Miller in Pearson and Uricchio's *The Many Lives of Batman*, I will look at Geoff Klock's *How and Why to Read Superhero Comics* and Warren Ellis' *Come in Alone* as representative, if somewhat extreme, examples. I shall begin with Klock's work.

Klock's *How and Why to Read Superhero Comics* is as important and insightful a tract as has been written on the subject. It is an in depth analysis of revisionist comics since the mid-1980's using an array of literary theory. Using the ideas of Harold Bloom, Klock argues that revisionist comic books are those that are written to both acknowledge and challenge the poetic tradition of the superhero comic books.[20] Initially, Klock points out that many superhero titles and characters have survived for many decades and through many changes of creative teams, constituting a complex history and tradition which revisionist creators can refashion. [21]

From this point, Klock proceeds through a chronology of 'A-list' creators, primarily writers, beginning with Frank Miller and Alan Moore in the 1980's and ending in the present with Kurt Busiek, Warren Ellis and Grant Morrison. He treats each of these authors and their works to an in depth literary analysis, often using the work of Lacan, to tease out the hidden meanings of their best known motifs, themes and other aesthetic choices. Further, Klock evaluates each of the authors, both in terms of their furthering a

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[20] Klock, Geoff, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, (New York: Continuum, 2002) p. 28.
[21] Ibid.

project of radically changing superhero comics[22] and their importance to a canon of

comic book creators, although the line between the two often seems blurry.

While Klock does provide very interesting readings of some of the most important

books published in the last twenty years, for the purposes of my project his work has

some, understandable, limitations. Although his definition of what a revisionist superhero

comic is and some of his observations about their relationship to the traditions of the

genre are very useful, his exclusive focus on the great creators and works of the genre is

limiting. Klock's attempts to use Lacanian theory to glean insight into Alan Moore's

Watchmen, for example, is quite interesting as literary criticism but it is less useful if one

is trying to look at the broader picture of genre revision that has occurred since

Watchmen's publication.

In short, his focus on important works and creators does not provide very much

insight into the proliferation of the phenomenon among lesser titles and creators. Indeed,

commercial and genre influences are almost entirely absent from his analysis which

inadvertently gives one the impression that these works are entirely the result of artistic

genius working in a vacuum. Nevertheless, we will return to Klock in the final section of

this chapter when we consider the importance of changing and updating superhero

character properties, using revisionism as the most extreme example, to both the industry

and the genre.

Getting back to the task at hand, Klock's exclusive focus on the great creators of

the comics—over the industrial interests, fan activities, and other extra-textual factors

that influence the creation of comics—may be because Klock seems to be what I would

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[22] Klock actually seems to have a teleological endpoint for the evolution of the genre, going so far as to predict its future in his final chapter.

like to call a medium activist. This is to say that Klock is interested in raising the cultural

capital of the comic book medium to a level on par with film, prose or visual art. Thus it

is not surprising that he uses the tools provided by critical literary studies to both explore

the theory itself and to treat comic books as an object equally worthy of analysis as the

modern novel. Nor, in this light, is it surprising that his interest is in the best work

produced by the most acclaimed creators in the field. While there is nothing wrong with

this per se, it does blind his analysis to the importance of character properties as

commodities and the influence this fact wields upon the medium (a current example

could be the pressure the success of television's *Smallville* is exerting upon DC Comics

to reconfigure the *Superman* titles).

Another unabashed medium activist is Warren Ellis. His book, *Come in Alone*, is

a collection of critical pieces he wrote for the website Comic Book Resources and is

simultaneously a scathing criticism of mainstream comic book publishers and a blueprint

to 'save' the comic book medium. Strongly anti-superhero, Ellis advocates a

diversification of comic book genres along the lines of Japanese Manga, greater creators'

rights and the proliferation of small press publications in the face of the big two

publishers. All of these moves, he feels, would go a long way to ensuring the continuing

existence of a comic book industry, should the publication of superhero comics finally

collapse. Further, he believes that it would help the medium gain the prestige necessary

for it to be seen as a legitimate, respectable, creator-driven form in the eyes of the

mainstream world and the cultural elite.[23]

And perhaps he isn't wrong. Both he and Klock are likely correct in thinking that

a greater focus upon important creators, radical change to (and perhaps an abandonment

of) the superhero genre and a proliferation of genres and publishers would be good for the medium both in terms of its artistic quality and public respectability. Ellis is also likely correct that the big two publishers are more interested in servicing their long-running superhero titles than saving the medium.[24] This is most forcefully put when he states that "this business is not going to be 'saved' by everyone putting their combined weight and creativity behind concepts and characters owned by corporations. Because corporations aren't in it to save comics. They're in it to save themselves."[25]

Here, he points towards a basic point which limits medium and creator focused analysis of contemporary superhero narratives: the comic book publishing industry is not about the publication of comic books. Rather, it is focused on the production and maintenance of character properties. As I shall argue below, to truly understand the superhero genre and the mainstream comic book industry one must disentangle them, at least partially, from both the comic book medium and the talents of individual creators.

When the Warner Brothers Corporation acquired DC Comics in 1968 it did not do so to expand its publishing arm. Rather, DC was looked at as potentially rich source of licensing and movie properties.[26] This is not surprising when one considers that by the late 1960's, in the wake of the excitement generated by the *Batman* television show, DC Comics' licensing fees already outstripped their magazine sales.[27] Similarly, in the recent struggle over the ownership of Marvel Comics, as chronicled by Dan Raviv, this fact

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[23] Ellis, Warren, *Come In Alone*, (San Francisco: AIT/Planet Lar, 2001), p. 12-17.
[24] He puts this mostly strongly in Ellis, p. 141-4
[25] Ibid, p. 142.
[26] Boichel, Bill, "Batman: Commodity as Myth," in *The Many Lives of Batman*, p.16. Although I have seen conflicting dates for this transaction, 1968 does seem to be the year Warner Communications purchased DC comics. For another source see: Cook, Brad, "Warner Brothers: What's up Doc?," at *Brandchannel.com*, 29 July, 2002, at http://www.brandchannel.com/features_profile.asp?id=82.
[27] Gordon, Ian, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture: 1890-1945*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), p. 153.

became a recurring theme. Throughout his book, nearly every player in the high finance struggle over the company sang the praises of Marvel as a source of licensing revenue because it was home to a score of characters which many people can easily identify, even if they are not emotionally attached to them. Indeed, the greatest fear of the author was that Marvel may have gone into bankruptcy during this period and its host of near mythological characters would go up for auction in a piecemeal fashion.[28] Or worse yet, one may assume that they would disappear and eventually fall into the public domain…

Thus, although seemingly paradoxical, the central operation to current comic book publishers is not the publication of comic books. Rather, it is the creation and maintenance of character properties. By the term character properties, I am referring to any fictional character that has been registered, trademarked, copyrighted or patented and can be utilized not only in the creation of fictional narratives but licensed to promote a wide variety of products. It should be noted that this phenomenon is hardly limited to the comic book industry. It is prevalent—as the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Role-Playing Game*, recent *Law and Order* and *CSI* video games, or the revivals of the *He-Man* and *Strawberry Shortcake* cartoons and toy lines attest—throughout popular commercial culture. One could even go further and include the ownership of the likeness of long dead celebrities like Fred Astaire and Steve McQueen, popular wrestlers, like Hulk Hogan and porn stars, like Jenna Jameson, in this category.

With this in mind, I hope to briefly explore the phenomenon of character properties as it pertains to the comic book industry, arguing that it, more than the notion of words and pictures upon a page, defines the industry and the products it produces. To

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[28] See Raviv, Dan *Comic Wars: How Two Tycoons Battled over the Marvel Comics Empire- And Both Lost* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001),, p. 12, 34, 54, 176-7 or 266, for example. His fear that the characters

this end, I will begin by describing the historical background of character properties in North America. I will then proceed to briefly discuss how they function to generate revenue for the corporations that own them. Lastly, I will discuss how the protecting, if not the attempted enhancing, of the economic value of character properties, by their owners, can have interesting effects upon the narratives they produce; often intersecting and redefining the conventions of a genre dominated by the characters of the two largest comic book publishers.

While it is true that Richard Outcault no longer holds, in the eyes of most scholars, the title of 'father of the comic strip' he can be regarded, especially in the context of the comic industry, as the father of modern character properties. Indeed, as Ian Gordon points out, in his *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture: 1890-1945*, Outcault's Yellow Kid character's capacity to promote newspapers was at the heart of the struggle between Pulitizer's New York World and Hearst's New York Journal over Outcault's services in the 1890's.[29] Andrew Wernick, in his book *Promotional Culture,* claims that the Yellow Kid was valued as a promotional sign that stood in for the newspapers themselves, explaining both the character's value to Hearst and Pulitizer and the emergence of the term 'yellow journalism.'[30] Nor were these newspaper barons the only ones to see the commercial potential of the Yellow Kid. Outcault himself attempted to copyright the name and likeness of the kid in September of 1896 in an apparent attempt to control and profit from the vast number of products being produced bearing the Yellow Kid's image.

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will be auctioned off and then "simply disappear," can be found on p.166.

[29] Gordon, p. 14.

[30] Wernick, Andrew, *Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression*, (London: Sage Publications, 1991) p. 95.

Although, due to an application irregularity, Outcault's copyright application was only partially successful, it did establish the legal status of illustrated characters as properties that could be created, sold and licensed in the marketplace. In fact, a few years later, Outcault created his next character, Buster Brown, with copyright laws and licensing revenues in mind. This is, of course, reflected in the existence of the Buster Brown line of shoes long after the demise of the, now largely forgotten, comic strip.[31] Thus, the concept of the character property was born alongside the modern comic strip and the two have been intertwined ever since.

The strength of character properties as sources of licensing revenues was increased, according to Neil Harris, by the expansion of copyright law in the 1920's and 30's. These broader laws led to a situation that had significant financial benefits for individuals like Walt Disney and Edgar Rice Burroughs in the 1930's. In 1924, for example, copyright was expanded from protection from literary imitation to cover any form of adaptation and subsidiary, and in 1936 it was decided that anticipation by older, public domain forms does not invalidate one's copyright. Thus it became possible to copyright *a* Hercules or Buffalo Bill while leaving the actual mythological and historical figures within the public domain.[32]

This latter development would have great significance for the comic book industry. In 1940, National Periodicals (the company which would become DC Comics) sued Bruns Publications to suppress a character called Wonderman, arguing that he was a blatant imitation of their new sensation, Superman. Bruns Publications, on the other hand,

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[31] Gordon, p. 31-44.
[32] Harris, Neil, "Who Owns Our Myths? Heroism and Copyright in an Age of Mass Culture," in *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) p. 240-242.

argued that Superman was merely an updating of the Hercules mythology and, therefore, not eligible for copyright. The judge disagreed, claiming that Wonderman was too close in specific details to Superman and set a landmark precedent for the protection of character properties in favor of their owners.[33]

Jane Gaines argues by the late 1940's, after the United States Trademark Act of 1946, called the Lanham Act that trademark protection emerged as the preferred legal device to protect character properties.[34] Unlike copyright laws, which originated in an attempt to protect authors from piracy and were seen to reward individual enterprise and creativity, trademark law began with the intention of protecting consumers from shoddy, imitation, merchandise. This shift towards trademark protection originated, according to Gaines, in the aftermath of the so-called 'Sam Spade' case between Warner Brothers and Dashiell Hammet. The dispute between Warner Brothers and Hammet began because Warner Brothers sought to prevent the author from publishing further Sam Spade novels after the success of the film version of *The Maltese Falcon*. The studio felt that they had legal ownership of the character after purchasing the rights to Hammet's novel. The judge disagreed. He decided that one could copyright characters only if they constituted the whole of the work, as was arguably the case in the dispute between National Periodicals and Bruns Publications because comic and cartoon characters were so easily rendered and recognized out of context.[35]

In light of this decision, and with the emergence of television and all of the licensing potential of its programs' characters, trademark rapidly became the preferred

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[33] See Harris, p. 242-3, or Gaines, Jane, "Superman and the Protective Strength of the Trademark," in *The Logics of Television*, Patricia Mellencamp eds, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 175
[34] Gaines, p. 171.
[35] Gaines, p. 176.

manner of insuring a monopoly on a character's profitability. Trademark was considered advantageous to entertainment companies for two main reasons. The first was that because trademark protection protected properties in terms of their source, rather than copyright's focus on authorship, companies were able to register titles and characters if they indicated that they were part of a series of stories or programs from the same source. This was particularly useful to companies producing works for visual media as the distinctive appearance of their characters, and in some cases series' titles, could basically be constituted as brand names unto themselves which could then be easily licensed out and imprinted upon a variety of products. This not only facilitated the financial exploitation of characters, but, according to Gaines, helped sever their connection to any one given author or creator.[36]

The second advantage of trademark over copyright protection lay in its longevity. At the time, copyright protection existed for 50 years after the first publication or release of a given text or the author's life. After this, copyrighted works, including characters, reverted into the public domain unless they were part of a continuing series. With trademark protection, however, fictional characters were, and are, protected for as long as they identify a series of narratives from the same source.[37] Taken together, all of these legal decisions have created an environment where protected character properties, especially easily recognizable ones, have become valuable commodities which lend themselves to a variety of media and licensing uses.

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[36] Gaines, p. 177-8.
[37] Gaines, p. 181-2.

The extent to which character properties serve to generate large licensing revenues or further synergistic corporate strategies is fairly well established.[38] From this perspective it is easy to see why one can regard the primary business of American comic book publishers as being the management of their character properties. Nor is this a recent development. Many writers have pointed out the extent to which navigating through a world flooded with licensed products is a common place occurrence in contemporary consumer culture. In an interesting contrast to these descriptions, Jane Gaines invites her readers to imagine they are in America in 1948:

> the usher punches your **SUPERMAN** Club Card as you enter the local motion picture theater to see Chapter Three, "The Reducer Ray," and as you enter the dark house you carefully slip the card back into your **SUPERMAN** billfold, anticipating the fifteenth week when a completely punched card entitles you to a free admission. As you leave the theater, still chewing the free **SUPERMAN** bubble gum, compliments of the exhibitor (who paid 52 cents for a box of 80 sticks), you pass the dry-goods store where you see a **SUPERMAN** movie viewer exhibited in the window...[39]

She continues, in the same vein, pointing out the extent to which the licensable aspect of protected character properties has been an economic incentive for the comic book publishing, or any other entertainment, industry for decades.

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[38] See McAllister, Matthew P, "Ownership Concentration in the U.S. Comic Book Industry," in *Comics and Ideology*, McAllister, Sewell and Gordon eds, (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), p. 17, 26-30
[39] Gaines, p. 185. Bold type in original

In simple terms, using the case of Marvel Comics as described by Dan Raviv, the exploitation of character properties works, in a nutshell, as follows:[40] The publication of comic books develops, and keeps in circulation, the company's stable of character properties. These are then licensed for secondary commercial purposes, like pajamas toys, films and television programs, generating the bulk of the company's income. The advertising and promotional work, done by the licensees for their specific products, is considered to boost the sales of all licensed products, the comic books themselves and raises the profile of the featured characters in general. This, in turn, keeps the character properties in circulation and raises their overall value in terms of both selling comic books and licensing.

Given that the licensing of the characters is vastly more profitable than the sales of the comics they appear in, some may question why Marvel and DC continue to bother publishing comic books at all. Indeed, Warren Ellis once claimed that "if you subtracted the Superman comics from DC's schedule tomorrow, about fifty thousand people would notice (if that.) And the Superman apparel and merchandising machine – which is where the actual money in the Superman trademark is generated – would roll on without noticing. Hell, the WB stores don't even sell Superman comics."[41] While this may be true, the current owners of Marvel Comics seem to feel that "the characters in the movies and on the sheets and lunch boxes had to be based on *something*." In effect the publication of comic books by the two largest publishers is—more or less—research and development for licensing revenues; a loss leader for a larger enterprise.

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[40] Raviv, p. 54.
[41] Ellis, p. 141

One can see how it has become well established that comic book character properties are often seen, from a political economic standpoint, as profitable signifiers deployed across a wide range of commodities in the service of corporate quests for profit. At this point, however, beyond suggestions of the economic and legal benefits of the serial form or suggestions that the content of American comic books has been subordinated to larger corporate licensing goals, most analysis in this vein stops.[42] The importance of character properties to publishers' profits, beyond the actual sales of comic books, does have an impact upon the form and content of many comic books currently published. As will be briefly sketched out below, this impact is cannot be seen as merely negative or simple.

I would like to open this discussion with a question: what are *The Ultimates*? There are a few different ways of answering this question. Beginning in 2000—the same year as Bryan Singer's film adaptation of *X-Men* and a year prior to Sam Raimi's *Spiderman*—Marvel's line of 'Ultimate' titles, consisting at present of *Ultimate Spiderman, Ultimate X-Men, The Ultimates* and *Ultimate Fantastic Four*, are an attempt to resituate and revise several of their most popular, and enduring, character properties in order to make them accessible and relevant to audiences currently unfamiliar with them. It is also an attempt to capitalize upon the increased publicity these characters have received since the recent spate of Marvel Comics based films. The Ultimate line is also a fictional universe entirely separate from the continuity of the titles Marvel has published since the 1960's. Lastly, they are also a family of books originally written by two writers consistently ranked in *Wizard Magazine*'s top ten creators list, Brian Michael Bendis and Mark Millar, and who have apparently been given a great deal of creative freedom for

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[42] See Gaines, p. 178 or McAllister, p. 28

writers handed such canonical characters.[43] In short, Marvel's ultimate line can be seen as a set of revisionist genre texts constituted by, at least, the two vectors of force so far identified in this chapter: the growth of complex storytelling by star creators and the corporate interest in maintaining and, if possible, increasing the value of their character properties.

Although skeptical about their chances for succeeding, Warren Ellis has pointed out that the Ultimate titles are an attempt to 'save' mainstream American comic books, and superhero comic books in particular.[44] Being interested in transforming the medium itself, Ellis would like nothing more than to see the larger comic book publishers, with their stables of serviced trademarks, collapse. Nevertheless, Ellis is correct in his observation that the Ultimate line's project of reviving the flagging fortunes of older superheroes points to some of the long term difficulties in basing a business upon character properties.

Many of Marvel's characters, like Spiderman, the Hulk, Captain America and the X-Men have become a recognizable part of our common culture. Maintaining this status and keeping them interesting to contemporary and future audiences is a challenge. One only has to think of the disappearance and failed attempts to revive many older character properties, like television and radio's the Lone Ranger or Superman's pulp predecessor Doc Savage, to see that Marvel's character equity is far from secure.

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[43] See *Wizard* #112 (January 2001), p. 155 or #0 (September 2003), p. 164, for top creator listings. The extent of their creative freedom can be judged from articles about the line: Lawrence, Christopher, "The Ultimate Test," in *Wizard* #112 (January 2001), p. 40-43, Lawrence, Christopher, "'Ultimate' Avengers," in *Wizard #121* (October 2001), p. 22-7 or Cotton, Mike, "Fantastic Voyage," in *Wizard* #145 (November 2003) p. 44-50.

[44] Ellis, p. 112.

One of the chief difficulties faced by Marvel is, perhaps ironically, one of the key components—within the comic book medium at least—of the superhero genre: continuity. In a nutshell, continuity in comic books is the remembered and referenced history of their characters and their fictional universes. Thus, in many cases, Marvel titles are essentially open-ended continuations of soap opera like sagas stretching back to the early 1960's. As later chapters will attempt to demonstrate, continuity is difficult to do away with as it a source of pleasure for comic book fans when their knowledge of, often obscure, aspects of a character's past is rewarded by references to past issues. However, as has been pointed out by Ellis,[45] few potential new readers, especially in light of the recent Marvel films, are likely to be interested in sorting out the details of 40 plus years of character history. While this would be a difficult enough problem to overcome with an isolated title which solely featured one character, it is further complicated by the phenomenon of superhero comic book universes.

The superhero universe is another characteristic feature of the superhero genre, as it has manifested in the comic medium. Beginning, arguably, with the publication of the first Justice Society of America story in the early 1940's and first really developed as a concept by the Marvel titles of the 1960's, superhero universes have tended to be the fictional worlds inhabited by all of a given company's characters and constituted by their interaction. From the perspective of the reader, superhero universes allow for more complex stories because they create a community for their characters to shape and interact in. From a commercial standpoint, the universe serves as a promotional tool. It makes it possible to have more popular characters 'crossover' with less popular

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[45] Ellis, p. 112.

characters. Thus they can launch new characters in popular titles or have a character like Spiderman appear in a less popular title, like *Runaways,* to boost its sales.[46]

Offsetting the promotional and, for knowledgeable fans, narrative advantages of company superhero universes is that it creates another layer of knowledge that can be daunting to a new, or potentially new, reader. If, as Ellis argues, the amount of knowledge required to comfortably follow the exploits of one contemporary superhero comic is unrealistic to demand of a new reader, the added complication of any one given superhero title drawing on the past events of another may seem ridiculous. However, as I will illustrate below and in the next chapter, the industry does attempt to redress these problems with a number of narrative techniques and products.

A related challenge to the ongoing value of character properties lies in their tendency to become associated with specific historical moments and appear as dated, if not outmoded. This has been a particularly difficult problem for Marvel characters as their topicality and contemporainty in the 1960's was largely how they differentiated themselves from DC and was an important basis of their popularity. Indeed, this is an article of faith for those familiar with the history of the company and its characters. As the dust jackets of their *Marvel Masterworks* series of hardcover reprints states, "these were characters who spoke, thought and acted like ordinary people, albeit people who were blessed – or cursed – with extraordinary powers. Their adventures weren't neatly tied up at the end of an issue. As in real life, their actions could have long-range consequences. And some were hated and feared simply because they were different."[47]

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[46] For a discussion of the promotional aspects of superhero universes see Ellis, p. 188-189.
[47] *Marvel Masterworks*, vol 7, 1988.

Unfortunately, from a corporate perspective, what made the Marvel stable of characters contemporary in the early 1960's is precisely what dates them today.

The Ultimate line, then, is an attempt to solve these long-term problems with Marvel's characters and produce books capable of capitalizing upon the popularity of texts featuring Marvel superheroes in other media.[48] This is at the core of the line's mission statement, summed up by Marvel editor-in-chief Joe Quesada, as being to "refashion the Marvel Universe (as if Stan Lee and company created it in 2001) to create a jumping on point for readers of all ages... These characters are iconic, we just have to tweak them to add relevancy."[49] Thus, one can see that the Ultimate line is a set of revisionist superhero texts that are intended to keep Marvel's core characters accessible and relevant to contemporary audiences. Nor is it unique.

Revisions of comic book characters and continuity with these intentions have occurred on many occasions, with many different results—not all of them positive—and differing impacts on the actual published comic books of the major players in the industry. These revisions, primarily driven to update characters for new audiences and their contexts, have generally resulted in the wholesale rewriting of comic book continuity. They are usually geared towards eliminating elements of a character that are perceived as dated and reducing a character's backstory, or at least the elements of it that a reader is expected to know, to a minimum. In some cases, often termed 'reboots' within the comic book community, these revisions result in totally erasing a character's entire fictional history, enabling creators to start from scratch.[50] The Ultimate line is an example

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[48] This is especially true of *Ultimate X-Men*, see Lawrence, "The Ultimate Test," p. 40-41.

[49] Quoted by Lawrence in, "Ultimate Avengers," p. 24.

[50] It should be noted that although the term 'reboot' seems to have come into common comic book culture parlance in and around the 1994 relaunch of the Legion of Super-Heroes, the actual practices the term

of a reboot, although one that, as a special imprint of Marvel, has not yet displaced the titles set in its original continuity.[51]

I should point out that revisionist superhero narratives are amongst the most talked and written about kinds of superhero narratives. For example, Geoff Klock's book *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* focuses exclusively upon what he terms revisionary superhero narratives, while two of the most famous and acclaimed superhero comics ever published, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen,* are considered revisionist superhero narratives *par excellance.* Indeed, it is rare for a critical work on the genre not to devote considerable time to them. As Klock and others have pointed out, revisions of the superhero genre and its characters have produced some, if not most, of the genre's most interesting and exciting works and, as such, merit attention.

But what exactly are revisionist or revisionary superhero narratives? Klock argues that the revisionary superhero narrative is a label that "has been used by the comic book reading community to denote any superhero story that attempts a reworking of given characters or concepts."[52] While Klock himself, for reasons that will be discussed below, works with a narrower definition of the concept for his project, focusing on the '*visionary*' aspect of the term revisionary, this definition is a succinct way of defining the works I will be discussing for the balance of this chapter. However, I would like to

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describe had been done, albeit occasionally, since at least the mid-1980's or, arguably, the mid-1950's. Indeed, John Byrne, the creator responsible for the 'reboot' of Superman in the 1980's uses the term on his website when explaining some of his rather bitter remembrances of that project. The FAQ's section of Byrne's website can be found here:
http://www.byrnerobotics.com/FAQ/listing.asp?ID=2&T1=Questions+about+Comic+Book+Projects#30

[51] Basically, all of the titles in the Ultimate line are set in their own company owned comic book universe. This universe and its continuity have no direct ties to the other titles Marvel publishes beyond those stories chosen to be retold in this new continuity. Thus, the current Marvel title *Uncanny X-Men* is a continuation of the characters and continuity that began with the publication of *Uncanny X-Men* #1 in the mid-1960's, while the ongoing *Ultimate X-Men* is essentially an independent entity that may retell certain cherished X-

amend Klock's version of the popular definition of a revisionary or revisionist superhero narrative slightly to denote any superhero story that attempts a reworking of given concepts, characters, or their histories.

I also feel that it is important to stress that when discussing revisionary or revisionist superhero narratives the terms are often used to denote works that are revisionist in at least one of two senses. The first level, perhaps most usefully associated with the reworking of concepts, is that of narratives that are seen to be attempts at, or result in, a general generic transformation or revision. Alan Moore's series *Watchmen* is an excellent example of a revisionary superhero narrative that operates on this level. Although the project was originally conceived as an attempt to revive interest in the Charleton stable of superhero properties that DC had recently acquired, the book's real importance lies in its deconstruction of the superhero genre. A deconstruction that, critics like Klock argue, has either made possible or, at the very least, influenced nearly every 'adult' superhero narrative created since.[53] In terms of gauging a given work's importance within and influence upon the genre of superhero narratives, particularly if a critic is examining a given work as art or literature, narratives that operate on this level are the ones given pride of place. Further, it is revisionary narratives that work to revise the genre as a whole that most easily lend themselves to comparison with revisionist texts

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Men stories, like the Phoenix Saga for example, but is not bound by what happened in the previous forty-years of X-Men titles.

[52] Klock, p. 16.

[53] Indeed, Klock claims that "the contemporary superhero narrative might be viewed as consisting of a series of footnotes to Miller and Moore." Klock, p. 3.

looked at by scholars, in disciplines like film and literary criticism, that are interested in generic transformation.[54]

The second, and slightly more modest, way that the label revisionist superhero narrative is used is to denote superhero texts that set out to rework or, in some cases rewrite, a given character and their history. John Byrne's *Superman: The Man of Steel*, which effectively restarted the character's continuity from scratch in a 1980's context, is an excellent example of this kind of revisionary narrative. While not particularly influential in terms of its storytelling innovations or serious exploration of the underlying themes and concepts of the superhero genre, *The Man of Steel* is still considered an important revisionist work in the comic reading community.

This is because *The Man of Steel* not only attempted to rework Superman into a character that was more attractive to a contemporary audience but explicitly, and some would say ruthlessly, rewrote the continuity of the character, rendering the previous forty years of stories null and void. Further, in many ways *The Man of Steel* was as influential as *Watchmen*. Not only were the changes made in the series reinforced throughout DC's line of comic books, licensed products and texts in other media, but the success of *The Man of Steel* in reviving interest in the character of Superman prompted a host of other works that sought to rework characters and their histories with an eye towards making them attractive to a contemporary audience including, arguably, Marvel's Ultimate line.[55]

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[54] See Cawletti, John G., "*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed., Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen eds, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 559-579, for an example of such criticism.

[55] This was true of DC in particular. Some notable examples would include *Hawkworld*, a reworking of *Hawkman* and *Hawkwoman* that has served as the basis of the incarnation of the character of *Hawkgirl* in the *Justice League* cartoon, *Emerald Dawn*, a retelling of the origin of the Silver Age *Green Lantern*, and the self-explanatory *Aquaman: Time and Tide*. It is important to note that not all of these revisions were particularly successful. The changes to the Hawk-characters have almost become a cautionary tale in the consequences of an unsuccessful revision of a set of characters.

It is important to note that these two categories of revisionary superhero narratives are not mutually exclusive. Many of the more ambitious and literary revisionist works that have arguably sought to transform or deconstruct the genre itself were, at the same time, reworkings of specific characters and their histories. Frank Miller's influential work on *Batman*, in the form of *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, and *Batman: Year One*, can be seen as a classic example of a revisionary work that not only interrogated and transformed the genre itself but revived interest in a character by reworking it to appeal to a modern audience. Indeed, so many revisionist works of the first type simultaneously rework characters and their histories that it is easy for one to mistake works like Byrne's *The Man of Steel* as merely being weak attempts at the kind of more radical revisions that are evident in works like Moore's *Watchmen*.

This lumping together of revisionist narratives that often have very different goals and ambitions can result in comparisons of apples with oranges. Most of Alan Moore's revisionist works, for example, can be seen as attempts to create high art out of the low culture cloth of the superhero genre, while Mark Waid's *Superman: Birthright* seems largely motivated by a desire to alter the history of the comic book continuity of the Superman titles to be more in line with the version of it put forward by the WB's successful *Smallville* television series. Comparing the two would, at best, highlight the intellectual and aesthetic complexity and depth of Moore's work in contrast to the fairly straightforward superheroic storytelling of Waid. At worst it would dismiss Waid's work as being inconsequential when compared to the canon of 'great' superhero narratives that has been created since the emergence of serious superhero narratives in the 1980s.

Another difficulty I have with Klock's work largely stems from his exclusive focus on 'great' revisionary works and his, often fairly catty, dismissal of works that do not fit into his vision of what a revisionist superhero narrative should be. While Klock's book is an undoubtedly important contribution to the emerging critical literature on comic books, I have a few issues with his approach to the subject that I must address before I can move on to my own arguments. The book sets out to apply psychoanalytic literary theory to some of the most canonical, and literary, revisionary superhero narratives that have been published in the last twenty years. Using these theories, Klock attempts to characterize all revisionary superhero narratives as either literary deconstructions of traditional superhero concepts and conventions or as attempts to push past these conventions towards a third wave of 'pop' superhero narratives that Klock sees as being just around the corner.

As mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, Klock is only interested in revisionary superhero narratives. Further, as he explicitly states in his introduction, he is only interested in a particular kind of revisionary superhero narrative. He states that the term "occurs in this book, not in the sense of a revisionary history, but in the sense of Bloom's strong poetic revision through misprison: it is the wish of the revisionist to find an original relation to truth. What should be emphasized in the use of the word *revisionary* here is not "revise" but "visionary." In the latter sense, it is not a value-neutral term. John Byrne's reworking of Superman and Wonder Woman, Mark Waid on *The Kingdom*, Todd Macfarlane's *Spawn*... are not truly revisionary and are not covered

here."[56] This passage illustrates two things that I feel are going on in Klock's work that need to be explicitly addressed.

The first is that Klock is creating a canon of great revisionary superhero narratives by highly esteemed creators and is really only interested in how visionary works relate and refer to each other. A result of this is that his work tends to refer solely to a small number of creators whose work is evaluated as 'strong' and is very dismissive of 'weak' works that are often labeled either nostalgic or inconsequential.[57] While these evaluations may be true for what they are, judgements on the merits of various superhero narratives as a literature, and may even be useful to his specific project they are somewhat limiting if one is not out to examine the best of what has been thought and said within the genre.

The second thing I need to address is that I find his definition of revisionary superhero narratives too prescriptive. Klock is collapsing two forms of revisionism within the genre, and is ultimately privileging those works that attempt to revise the core concepts and conventions of the genre, usually framed within Klock as an expression of tremendous artistic talent, over those works that primarily seek to rework characters and their histories for more commercial reasons. Although Klock claims that he is not discussing John Byrne's reworking of the Superman mythos because it is not truly revisionary, I would argue that Klock does not deal with it because it is not truly visionary in either an aesthetic or intellectual sense. If one accepts that there can be more than one way in which a superhero narrative can be revisionary, then I would argue that

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[56] Klock, p. 16-17 (emphasis in original). And at the risk of sounding too much like a fanboy, it was George Perez who reworked Wonder Woman, not John Byrne.
[57] See Klock, p. 144-5, for a characteristic set of dismissals of books that don't fit into his criteria for importance.

Klock's work is a vital contribution to understanding one stream of revisionary superhero narratives.

To better understand exactly how revisionism, particularly in the sense of reworking characters for contemporary audiences, works in the current comic book marketplace, I would like to end this chapter with a study of *The Ultimates*. Hopefully this example will show how the influence and styles of highly esteemed creators can intersect with the corporate interests of the comic book industry in the production of relatively high profile reworkings of major characters and continuity. Such an example can be found in *The Ultimates*, credited to Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch, a title that was intended to be the fourth title to be added to the Ultimate line. It is most easily compared to Marvel's long running title *The Avengers* and is, in a nutshell, a team book relaunching many of Marvel's stalwart characters including Captain America, Thor, the Hulk, Iron Man, Giant Man and the Wasp.

However, equally important, at least in the promotional material and articles about the title, *The Ultimates* feature two star creators: writer Mark Millar and artist Bryan Hitch. Although other creators are involved in the book, such as inker Andrew Currie or colorist Paul Mounts, the status of the two creators is such that they are generally established as the authors of the title. That the creators—Millar in particular—and revisionist project of *The Ultimates* are considered to be, even by Marvel itself, a key draw to the title is quite apparent.

Within Marvel's 2002 Preview, a series of promotional pages published in many of their titles during February and March 2002, then-president of Marvel Bill Jemas is quoted as stating "Comic Books have been locked into creative patterns and moral views

established in the 1940s and 1950. Radioactivity turns a white middle-class American into super crime fighter... tune in next month for more of the same for the next 50 freaking years! Mark Millar blasted onto the comic book scene as the iconoclastic battering ram, breaking through the cliches as a creative force establishing all-new, all-hip characters and contexts for the next 50 years."[58]

Similarly, in an article for *Wizard* magazine, "'Ultimate' Avengers, Christopher Lawrence recounts that "Mark Millar outed Iron Man last year. He cut Giant Man off at the knees. He Blew up the Hulk, crammed Thor's mace where the sun don't shine and "penetrated" Captain America with an oversized drill bit. Granted, the characters these unspeakable acts were perpetrated on were only Avenger look-alikes in the pages of WildStorm/DC's *Authority*, but the fact that Millar maliciously, proudly and—most disturbingly of all—happily mutilated the would-be Captain America and company has the writer wondering one thing: 'Can you believe Marvel gave me the Avengers?'"[59]

Taken together articles such as these seem to serve two purposes beyond simply raising awareness of the title in the minds of potential readers. Firstly, through their repetition of Millar's iconoclasm and stress on change, the articles make clear that the contemporary *Ultimates* will not be the sixties spawned *Avengers,* pointing to a style which can be associated with both the line of comics and Millar's own oeuvre. Secondly, they articulate and intertwine two sets of promotional signs as the 'stars' of the book. The first set is the celebrity of the creators. The second set is the 'Ultimate' versions of Marvel character properties, the names of which "represent a banked and transferable

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[58] "2002 Preview" credited to 'YourMan@Marvel,' as published in *Ultimate X-Men* #13, February 2002, p. 34-5 (the first two pages of the preview).
[59] Lawrence, "'Ultimate' Avengers" p. 23.

store of promotional capital," which can be used to move merchandise.[60] In theory, this would seem to be a mutually beneficial relationship between the creators and the company, lending Millar's reputation as one of the industry's subversive greats to some of Marvel's most mainstream characters, while Millar benefits from the prestige of creating such a high profile title.

So how have the corporate interests of Marvel Enterprises and the talents of Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch come together in *The Ultimates*? In order to provide a line of titles that readers with little or no experience with their established characters can enjoy without difficulty; *The Ultimates*, and the characters of the entire Ultimate line, were created as a 'rebooted' version of the Marvel Universe. In the case of *The Ultimates* this has emerged as a dim sum selection of elements, familiar to many comic book fans, of previous incarnations of the rebooted characters, placed in a contemporary context critical of the American 'War on Terror,' and reflecting Marvel's interest in casting its characters as mature and cinematic. The cinematic feel of the title is apparent with its first issue, set in 1945 and chronicling the final WWII adventure of Captain America, which has the look and feel of a contemporary war film, complete with panels depicting an epic airdrop, confused, muddy, battlefields, disillusioned grunts and arbitrary, hardly noticed, death. The attempt at giving the characters a more mature spin and the intertextual relationship between these new 'Ultimate' versions of these characters and their earlier incarnations, on the other hand, develops more slowly over the series' first six issues.

Thus, for example, the creators choose to play up Tony (Iron Man) Stark's alcoholism, first established in the late 1970's, and hint that he is a closeted homosexual. They recast Bruce Banner as a deeply insecure sci-fi geek (complete with *Buffy the*

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[60] Wernick, p. 109.

Vampire Slayer posters) whose girlfriend instills such feelings of inadequacy that he goes on a rampage as the Hulk to get her attention. And the title portrays Hank (Giant Man) Pym as a manic depressive, dependent upon prozac to stabilize his mood. The most dramatic direction this new look at these characters has taken lies in Hank Pym's relationship with his wife Janet (also known as the Wasp). Rather than the troubled, but loving, couple established in the old continuity, their relationship is represented as physically abusive.[61] Indeed the first story arc of the first six issues, that have been collected as a trade paperback, concludes with a domestic dispute which leaves Janet near death and serves as a final demythologization of the hyper-masculine superhero (Hank looks down at her and states, chillingly, "You shouldn't have made me look small, Jan. You shouldn't have made me look small.") Most unsettlingly, their relationship remains unresolved.[62]

A pair of final points to be made in this brief discussion of the moves made by those responsible for *The Ultimates* lies in its reflexivity and explicit use of the present American Presidential administration as a context in which to reconfigure these characters. As befitting a title that seems to be as interested in deconstructing superheroes as in reviving a set of character properties the title and its characters are pointedly self-reflexive. Throughout the series' run the characters make constant cracks about capitalizing upon the merchandising rights of their super-heroic alter egos, coming up with a dream cast for the film about their lives and questioning the extent to which they are merely a PR stunt to prop up the Bush administration. Indeed, it is their fictional status as a public relations tool that, given that they are their own worst enemies,

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[61] It should be noted that the Pyms' relationship was implied to be abusive in the early 1970's.

constantly backfires that gives *The Ultimates* its satirical edge when dealing with the realities of contemporary America. The title's uncertainty as to whether to cast *The Ultimates* as the super-heroic equivalent of secret police at the beck and call of a corrupt administration or as buffoons whose private failings outweigh attempts to shore up their public image in a burlesque of the traditional superhero comic makes, for this reader, *The Ultimates* an engaging title that reflects interesting times.

In conclusion, this chapter has attempted to trace out two of the dominant ways of looking at contemporary American superhero comics. While both those who focus upon the great creators of the comic medium and those who look exclusively upon the tactics of the corporations which publish superhero comics have limitations, I hope this chapter has pointed to their contributions as well. At the risk of hopelessly over using the word, I ultimately hope that I have managed to carve out a space between these two extremes. I have tried to do this by demonstrating that some of the more pragmatic moves made by comic book publishers to keep their characters profitable both affect and provide fertile ground for many of the leading creators of American superhero comics. This is especially evident in the case of revisionist superhero narratives, and particularly in the case of reboots.

As my brief study of the *Ultimates* demonstrated, revisionist comic book narratives, while opening up a space for popular and critically acclaimed creators to deconstruct the superhero genre, are often equally driven by the need of comic book publishers to keep their characters accessible to a wider audience. Indeed, without the film licensing agreements that resulted in the recent cycle of Marvel comics based

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[62] All of this is taken from: Millar, Mark, Hitch, Bryan, Currie, Andrew, *The Ultimates*, #1-6 (March 2002-August 2002), New York: Marvel Comics, 2002.

films—most notably the Spiderman, X-Men, and Hulk films—it is unlikely that the Ultimate line would have come into existence. Although creators, like Alan Moore or, more recently, Mark Millar, may have created works of equal quality to *Watchmen* or *The Ultimates* without the commercial impetus to update DC's stock of Charlton superheroes or Marvel's core characters the reality is that these works were created in a context in which corporate interests carried as much weight as creative genius. With this in mind, it is important to reflect upon the influence of the corporate need to maintain their character properties when dissecting the oeuvres of important comic book creators without dismissing it as necessarily negative or constricting.

Chapter Two

Recycled Wonder:

The Commodification of Comic Book History

"Superman

From the Thirties to the Seventies

With 36 Pages in Full Color

Including 26 Original Covers

In Full Color"

"For all those who have been stirred to breathless excitement by the daring

exploits of Superman, the comic strip's mightiest hero, here is a rare collector's treasury

of classic adventures, spanning forty years, and never before published in book form.

***Superman: From the Thirties to the Seventies** is a thrilling journey into the past, a*

*stunning documentary of Superman's life from his first appearance in **Action Comics** in*

1938 to the hip, committed Superman of the Seventies..."

Dustjacket to **Superman: From the Thirties to the Seventies**, published in 1971.

" 'The most important, most imitated character in the history of comic book

fiction. An original pristine set of Superman 1-4, if available, could sell for $50, 000.' "

Robert M. Overstreet, quoted in a 1989 advertisement for **Superman Archives**

Volume One.

The practice of reprinting old material has been an important aspect of the

American comic book industry since its inception. Indeed, the first comic books were no

more than collections of newspaper strips that were packaged in magazine format and

sold as independent commodities. The eventual emergence of comic books filled with

new material is linked to the publication of *New Fun Comics* in 1935 by one Major

Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson. Wheeler-Nicholson, who founded the company that would

eventually become DC comics, is not believed to have published new material out of any

artistic consideration. Rather, this choice was made because the number of newspaper

strips that could be licensed for reprint were limited and it was, therefore, more cost-

effective to create new material than to license already popular characters.[63]

As a practice, the publication of new material may not have become the industry

norm if not for the breakout success of the Superman character with the publication of

Action Comics #1 in 1938. As the superhero boom of the late 1930's and early 1940's—a

period referred to as the Golden Age in comic book culture—went into full swing, the

publication of new material featuring new, superheroic, characters became increasingly

common. Indeed, since this era the publication of new material has become the norm in

mainstream American comic books, with the significant exception of the Archie line of

books.

Nevertheless, the reprint has never entirely gone away. Its prestige, however, has

fluctuated greatly, especially since the second superhero boom of the 1950's and '60's.

Given the enormous lengths the two major American comic book publishers go to keep

their characters both timeless and contemporary, as explored in the last chapter, it may

seem odd that the repackaging of old material remains an important facet of the comic

book industry. Although the owners of superhero character properties do not hesitate to

erase decades of continuity to make a character more accessible to new readers, they

nevertheless continue to market collections of stories—many of which now 'never

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[63]Goulart, Ron, *Over 50 Years of American Comic Books*, (Lincolnwood: Publications International, 1991)
p. 18-43.

happened' within a company's official continuity—that were written as far back as the 1930's and 40's. In fact, over the last couple of decades, the reprint has undergone a serious rehabilitation. It has gone from near ubiquity as an almost inevitable back-up feature in numerous titles to a commodity that is packaged and marketed as a luxury item for comic book readers with, apparently, distinguished taste.

This chapter will trace out and explore some aspects of this transformation in the status of the reprint. I am particularly interested in looking into the different ways reprints have been marketed, who they have been marketed to, and how they have come to be framed as documenting comic book history. To do so, I plan to do the following things in this chapter. To begin with I will provide a brief definition of the reprint as it is understood in comic book culture. I will then proceed to provide a brief history of the reprint and its marketing by DC comics between the early 1960's and the present. Interspersed with this history will be some discussions of the fans to whom such reprints are marketed. Finally, I will look at some of the differences between the current generation of luxury reprints and their predecessors, particularly in terms of how they are designed to appeal to contemporary collectors.

A reprint in comic book terminology is a story that has been reproduced in entirety or in part after its initial publication. The reprinted story can appear either on its own, as part of a collection of reprints, or as a portion of a comic otherwise featuring new material. This chapter will focus on books consisting almost entirely of reprints and that have been marketed as such. Although reprints have historically been used as material for back-up features, rarely, if ever, did the reprinted material rate mention on the cover of the title it was featured in or in in-house advertisements for said title. For instance,

although many issues of *Adventure Comics* in the 1960's featured a new story starring the Legion of Super-Heroes and a reprint story, labeled a 'Hall of Fame Classic,' starring Superboy, the presence of the Superboy reprint was not announced on the covers of *Adventure Comics* during this era. Since I am looking primarily at how reprints themselves have been marketed it only makes sense to look at books consisting nearly entirely of reprints because their marketing will be done on the basis of the reprinted content, rather than on new material.

Finally, it is important to stress that by marketing I am referring primarily to the channels of distribution for the reprint, the ads for it, and its cover. Since the text and images on a comic book cover, be it a periodical or a trade paperback, are the first impressions a potential consumer has of the product and its content it seems only right to consider covers a part of a book's advertising. As they say about food, "the first bite is with the eye."

As a site to study the repackaging of comic book history as a luxury item, reprints are quite useful. The main reason for this is that the prestige of reprints and how they are marketed has changed dramatically over the years. In the course of this chapter, I will argue that this development can be considered part of the emergence of comic book collecting as a hobby and the industry's attempts to sell to an older demographic than its traditional market of children.[64] Further, I will argue that an important element of the current generation of luxury reprints is the inclusion of text pages, often by comic book creators or historians. These introductions and post-scripts often provide readers with information about the creators behind the reproduced stories, the influence the reprinted

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[64] A brief discussion of this demographic shift can be found in the introduction to this thesis.

stories had on later comics, or they frame the reprinted works within the history of comic books.

This development can be considered particularly interesting for several reasons. The first is that it appeals to the expert knowledge of the fan. A common theme running through much of the work on fandom is the stress placed upon the acquisition of expert knowledge about the object of fannish devotion. This is often framed as a crucial element of a fan's self-identification as a fan, as a source of pleasure, and the possession of such knowledge is arguably a major form of cultural capital within fandom. As Jeffrey A. Brown writes in "Comic Book Fandom and Cultural Capital,"

> close scrutiny, collecting, analyzing, rereading, and accumulation
>
> of knowledge is deemed acceptable for a serious work of 'art' but
>
> ridiculous for a mass medium. Yet it is by mirroring these very practices
>
> of 'Official' cultural economy that members of the fan community seek to
>
> bolster their cultural standing within their own circle of social contact...
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> Knowledge and the ability to use it properly amounts to the symbolic
>
> capital of the cultural economy of comic fandom, but it is the comic book
>
> itself that represents the physical currency.[65]

Another reason that the presence of elaborate introductions to these collections can be considered an important development in the history of comic book reprints is that the historical and biographical information they provide was once largely the domain of

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[65] Brown, Jeffrey A., "Comic Book Fandom and Cultural Capital," in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 30, #4, Spring 1997, p.22. For other work on fandom that similarly point out the importance of fan-text specific knowledge, see: Jenkins, Henry, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 10, or Hills, Matt, *Fan Cultures*, (New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 10-11, 16, and p.65-89 for a more nuanced discussion of expert knowledge and fandom.

independent fan publications.[66] As such, the inclusion of such knowledge within products actually produced by the major comic book publishers can be seen as both catering to the perceived desires of fandom and, to a certain extent, co-opting the work done by earlier generations of fans. Indeed, I will argue that developments within the packaging and marketing of reprints have been closely linked to perceptions about the fans who are presumed to purchase them.

Finally, at least as far as text pages focusing on the creators of the reprinted material goes, this development is interesting since it can be seen as redressing a historical wrong. For instance, each *DC Archive* edition identifies, where possible, the creators responsible for a reprinted tale and often provides some biographical information about them. In the Golden Age of comics especially, comic book creators worked in near anonymity with a given story credited, if at all, to a given character's creator. For instance, *Batman* stories were credited to Bob Kane until the early 1960's regardless of whether he participated in their creation. By setting the record straight, giving credit, and, in some cases, royalties to many of the neglected writers and artists of the industry's past, recent reprints not only provide access to comic book history but can be seen as attempting to correct some of the wrongs perpetrated by the industry on its creators.

As mentioned earlier, in one form or another, publishing reprints of old material has been a part of the American comic book industry since its inception. However, I would like to begin my, admittedly partial, history of DC comics' reprints firmly within the Silver Age of comics. The Silver Age, beginning in 1956 and lasting, roughly, until the early 1970's, is an appropriate point to commence for several reasons. One reason is

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[66] Pustz, Matthew J., *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999), p. 181-6.

that this period marked the beginning of organized comic book fandom, at least in terms of superhero comics.[67] Indeed, the influential fanzines *Xero* and *Alter Ego* began publication in 1960 and 1961 respectively, and the first known comic book convention took place in New York city in 1964.[68] Given my interest in looking at the relationship between fans and reprints, it is logical to look no further than the beginnings of organized fandom.

Another reason is that this period also marked the so-called 'superhero revival' that is seen as one of the defining features of the Silver Age. During the first superhero boom of the late 1930's and early 1940's, DC comics had published the adventures of a large number of superhero characters. Although best known for Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, the company also owned and published the Green Lantern, the Flash, Hawkman, the Atom and many others. When the superhero boom went bust in the late forties, the titles featuring all of DC's superhero characters—with the exceptions of Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman—were either cancelled or shifted focus to other, better selling, genres.

The superhero revival refers to the reintroduction of many of these, second tier, DC superhero characters, beginning with The Flash in 1956. However, these reintroductions were essentially reboots, as discussed in Chapter One, and the new characters often had little more than the same name as their forties predecessors. However, the superhero revival added two elements to the mix that are pertinent to this discussion. The first is that, although the revived characters were in many respects new

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[67] The earliest fanzines, for instance, were published as tributes to the EC line of Science Fiction, Horror and Suspense comics that were, famously, targets of the anti-comic hysteria of the early 1950's. See: Goulart, Ron, *Over 50 Years of American Comic Books*, (Lincolnwood: Publications International, 1991), p. 314, or Pustz, p.39-41, 181-2.

characters they were nevertheless tied to their Golden Age predecessors through their names and concepts.

Matthew J. Pustz—drawing on comic fandom historian Bill Schelly—points out that many of the early members of comic book fandom were primarily fans of the comics and characters produced in the thirties and forties. As Pustz argues, "reviving these old names in new heroes attracted a new generation of readers ready for the adventures of superheroes while establishing a sense of continuity with the fans of the original versions, who were beginning to establish the new comics fandom."[69] Indeed, much of the content of the earliest issues of two influential fanzines, *Xero* and *Alter Ego*, was about Golden Age titles and characters.[70] As such, it seems likely that the editors at DC comics knew that reprints of Golden Age books had an in-built audience in the form of early comic book fans. Further, these fans were already producing material similar to the biographical, historical, and/or nostalgic text pages that currently frame more luxurious collections of reprints, at least for those who had access to fan publications.

The second element the superhero revival adds to a discussion of reprints is that it provided a clear break from the past. Indeed, in Ken Quattro's article "The New Ages: Rethinking Comic Book History," the first use of the term 'Golden Age' to refer to the superhero boom of the 1930's and 40's is dated to 1960, and he believes that the term 'Silver Age,' referring to the era of the superhero revival, came into use around the same time.[71] In effect, the revival generated a clearly defined past that served as the foundation for the new generation of superhero characters. A clearly defined past that new fans were

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[68] See Pustz, p. 182, or Goulart, p. 315.
[69] Pustz, p. 43. Anecdotal evidence of this tendency can be found in Stedman, Raymond William, *The Serials: Suspense and Drama by Installment*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), p. p. 222-4.
[70] Ibid, p. 182.

invited to learn about, in part through reprints. In this sense, reprints of Golden Age

stories during and after the superhero revival can be seen as enhancing the sense of

continuity between past and present described by Pustz while simultaneously providing

readers some, limited, access to the history of the superhero genre.

In terms of DC's output, the *DC Giants* series and its successor line, *DC Super*

Spectaculars, were the first comic magazines that were normally comprised entirely of

reprint material. In 1960, the DC Giant line began as a series of 80-page annuals for some

of DC's most popular titles, including *Superman, Batman, Lois Lane, Superboy,* and *The*

Flash. These annuals were, in the words of a collector's website that features an in-depth

index of these books, "DC's first attempt to collect previously published material and sell

it to consumers."[72]

Evidently successful, after twenty-two 80-page annuals, the *DC Giants* line was

launched in earnest in 1964 with a numbering system for the 80-page Giants that was

independent of the titles they were compilations of. In more or less this form, *DC Giants*

were released at a rate of one a month, each featuring material from one of a small group

of popular DC titles, until 1971. After 1971, the role of the *DC Giants* line was filled by a

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[71]Quattro, Ken "The New Ages: Rethinking Comic Book History," posted at www.comicartville.com.
[72] From "The Guide to *DC Giants*," posted at http://www.dcindexes.com/index.php. This site is only detailed source I have found on the publication of reprinted material at DC comics, or any other comic publisher for that matter. For the most part, the site seems intended for collectors interested in collecting the material and devotes a great deal of space to making sense of the multiple and eccentric numbering systems that were applied to the reprint books by DC. This is very useful as in many instances a DC Giant had three issues numbers: the number of the issue that had been made a giant, its order of appearance in terms of other giant issues of the same series, and its overall place within the publications of giant sized issues themselves. Thus, for example, a Superman Giant from 1966 could simultaneously be numbered *Superman* #183, *Superman Giant* #12, and *Giant* #G-18. For the purposes of this chapter, I will use the series' regular issue number (i.e. *Superman* #183) and its overall place in the Giants' series (i.e. #G-18). In addition to this, the site provides an impressive annotated index of the reprints and, where possible, cover imagery. Where possible, I have verified the information provided with the site with *The Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*. By way of indicating the serious and, arguably, scholarly intent of the site, it describes itself as serving "as a non-profit scholarly work which documents, promotes, and reviews the elements of DC comics during the 1940s through the 1980s."

successor line, *DC Super-Spectaculars*, that was essentially the same in terms of format and was published, if somewhat irregularly, until 1978.

For the publishers, the use of reprints was highly economical. Until the early 1980's, creators worked for a page rate that ensured that they received a fairly modest pecuniary reward for their work and signed away any claim on future royalties. Indeed, until the early 1970's it was standard practice at DC comics for creators to go uncredited when their stories were published. As such, these reprint compilations were an incredibly cheap and potentially profitable way for the company to repackage and resell old material.

Advertisements for these books within other comic books were quite common and were often little more than reproductions of the Giant's cover with additional text. Both the covers and the advertisements tended to place emphasis on the character, or characters, that were the subject of the Giant sized issue and the theme around which it was organized. For the most part, *DC Giants* announced themselves as compilations of the best stories of a given title around a certain theme. These themes ranged from novel or sensationalistic topics—as in a giant-sized issue of *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen* that promised stories about Jimmy as a giant turtle-man, werewolf, or witch doctor as examples of "Jimmy's Weirdest Adventures With His Pal, Superman!"—to slightly more sober compilations featuring "The Flash's Greatest Super-Speed Rivals," "The Complete Saga of the Death of Lighting Lad," or "Prize Stories for the Superman Library."[73]

In terms of the reprinted content of the *DC Giants* line, how it was framed, and its intended audience, a few general observations can be made. The first is that relatively

little emphasis was placed upon the specialized knowledge and tastes that characterize both fans and collectors. The terminology and jargon of the burgeoning comic fandom is largely absent from the ads and covers of these books. The label 'Golden Age,' for instance, is referenced on only six of the over 100 covers to 80-Page Giants that can be found at http://www.dcindexes.com/giants/80page.php.[74]

A second observation is that despite the interest in older material that is considered to have driven early comic fandom, most of the material reproduced in the *DC Giants* was of a fairly recent vintage. For instance, a 1967 *Superman* Giant that claimed to reprint "The Greatest Super-Stories Published During the Last 28 Years," contained four stories from 1961, and three other stories from 1954, 1956, and 1958 respectively.[75] In short, despite the often hyperbolic claims of their covers, *DC Giants* tended to focus on reprinting stories from their relatively recent past.

Finally, despite the two observations above, there were exceptional instances where either Golden Age material was reproduced or appeals were made to fans who sought to expand or confirm their knowledge about the history of DC comics. Although not prominently displayed on their covers, text pages about older DC comics—sometimes little more than lists of 'classic' stories—and cover galleries featuring reproductions of Golden Age covers were fairly common. Additionally, certain *DC Giants* did make an appeal to fans interested in experiencing the comics of the previous generation.

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[73] The cited issues are: *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen* # 104 [G-38] (August-September, 1967), *Flash* #160 [#G-21] (April, 1966), *Adventure Comics* #403 [#G-81] (March-April, 1971), and *Superman* #183 [#G-18] (January, 1966).
[74] This archive of scanned covers of *DC Giants* features a staggering 108 or the 111 books published as part of that line.
[75] *Superman* #193 [G-31] (January-February, 1967).

Perhaps the most extreme example can be found in *Superman* #183. The cover shows Superman holding onto two large reproductions of art from Golden Age Superman stories with another such reproduction placed along side his right leg. With an inviting smile, Superman tells the prospective reader, "Readers, now you can read Superman stories published before you were born! Less than one hundred copies of this issue (presumably referring to one of the two art reproductions he is shown holding) are in existence! And this story is so rare collectors will pay $30.00 and up for a perfect copy!" Along with this image are two text boxes. The first reads, "Show this story to your Ma and Dad! Do they remember the first story of Mr. Mxyzptlk, the super-pest. A tale printed when they were kids!!" The second reads "Plus other out-of-print stories featuring the most popular action hero of all time!."[76]

The content of the issue consisted of six reprinted stories and two text features. Of the stories, half date from the early 1940's, while the three remaining stories were first published between 1958 and 1960. The two text features are "Famous Stories of the Golden Age," a list of several Golden Age Superman stories, and "A Superman Quiz for Mom and Dad." Given the references to the parents of the reader in the issue's cover blurbs and quiz it is easy to infer that although the content of the issue may have appealed to older fans interested in Golden Age stories such readers were not the issue's target audience.

Taken together, one can come to a few conclusions about the DC Giant line. Firstly, despite their often hyperbolic claims to be collections of *the* greatest Superman, Flash, or Batman stories, they were ultimately focused upon relatively recent periods of

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[76] All quotes from Swan, Curt, Klein, George, *Superman* #183 [#G-18] (January, 1966) New York: DC Comics, 1966, Cover .

DC's publishing history. Nor, in all fairness, did they ask to be taken seriously as documents reproducing key stories in the history of comics.

Secondly, they rarely, if ever, seem to have been designed to make a direct appeal to the comic book collector *as* a comic book collector. While the content of some of the Giants may have appealed to fans looking for cheap access to a featured Golden Age story or, through text features, may have confirmed or expanded a fan's knowledge of comic book history, serious fandom was not the target market for the line. Rather, the books clearly seem to have been aimed at the contemporary mass-market of children and any appeal they may have had to more serious collectors was likely accidental; a byproduct of DC's interest in profiting a second time from some of their material.[77]

The next major landmark in the development of reprints at DC comics can be found in its *Famous First Editions* line. Although DC continued to publish reprints along the lines of its *DC Giants*, the handful of books published as part of the *Famous First Editions* line are notable for their content, distribution, and their marketing. In contrast to the *DC Giants* line, the books in the *Famous First Editions* were more oriented towards the emerging community of serious comic book fans and collectors.

It is important to note that the *Famous First Editions* line of reprints was an outgrowth of DC's more general experimentation with a 64 page, 10" by 13," tabloid format for its comics. Books in this format, referred to as 'Treasury-Sized' by DC itself, began to be published in 1972 and continued as a series of bimonthly releases with the

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[77] The DC Giant Line's successor, in terms of format and pricing, *DC Super-Spectaculars* was largely the same in terms of its approach to presenting older material. Perhaps a bit more serious in its presentation, and containing much more Golden Age material, the covers and ads for the Super-Spectaculars tended not to make direct mention of the pedigree of its reproduced material. Although the covers to many of the books were more likely to have the image of a featured Golden Age character upon them only very rarely would terms like 'Golden Age' or direct appeals to fans interested in much older material appear. Thus,

exception of an eight-month hiatus in 1976-7, until 1978. All of DC's tabloid sized books were initially labeled 'Limited-Collectors' Edition' and generally featured reprints organized around themes—like 'secret origins'—or particular popular characters.[78] In terms of the transformation of the status and prestige of reprints it is more useful to focus in on the *Famous First Editions* line than to look at the slightly more diffuse content of DC's other treasury-sized collections.

Each of the nine books published as part of the *Famous First Editions* line between 1974 and 1978 were reproductions of Golden Age comic books in their entirety. The reproduced books each featured the debut of popular characters or, in one case, the first comic to feature a team of superhero characters. In terms of distribution, although books in this line were distributed to traditional carriers of comic books, mail orders directly from the publisher seems to have been an important element of their strategy with the line.

Most importantly, the advertisements for the books and the blurbs on the books themselves directly addressed and attempted to appeal to readers who either self-identified as comic book collectors, or at least wished to. Ads for the books in other comics borrowed terminology from the culture of comic book fans and collectors that had begun to develop a decade earlier. Thus, one ad read "Receive your mint-condition collector's copy," while the comics themselves proudly displayed that they were part of a "Limited Collectors' Bronze Mint Series."[79]

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while the content of a Super-Spectacular was far more likely to appeal to fans interested in comic book history, such a fan had to know what to look for as the covers and ads for such books offered few clues.
[78] It is important to note that in the format's final year of publication there were several Treasury Sized releases, labeled 'All-New Collectors' Edition,' that featured new material. Perhaps the most notable of such 'all-new' releases was 1978's *Superman vs Muhammed Ali*.
[79] *Superboy Starring the Legion of Super-Heroes* #203, August 1974, p. 22.

In short, the *Famous First Editions* line marked the beginning within DC comics of a shift in the status of the reprint book. In contrast with the *DC Giants*, which seem to have been conceived as a relatively inexpensive way of filling giant sized books with content aimed primarily at children, the *Famous First Editions* line made an attempt to frame reprint books as a commodity with at least some aura of prestige and rarity. With its poaching of terms like 'mint-condition' from the vocabulary used by comic book collectors for grading originals, promises of fidelity to the original books,[80] and direct appeals to comic book collectors, there is a clear attempt to market *Famous First Edition* titles as a relatively up-market product aimed at a niche market of fans and collectors. Further, the fact that the advertisements for the books appealed to collectors to purchase them by mail order—rather than risk finding a rare copy at a local drug store in the days before comic book shops were common— can be seen as further reinforcing the idea that they were targeted at an active and discerning collector of comic books.

Nevertheless, the books within this line were still printed on cheap, albeit oversized, paper, and were priced within a range that some children could be reasonably expected to afford. Thus, although the line can be seen as attempting to cater to the interests of serious comic book fans it was, nevertheless, a hybrid that combined elements of the earlier mass market *DC Giants* with the appeals to specialized tastes and consumers that characterizes contemporary deluxe reprint collections like the *DC Archives* series of hardbacks. However, before the publication of the first edition of the *DC Archives* line two important developments took place. The first was the rise of the direct distribution system, as outlined in the introduction to this thesis, that provided a

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[80] An ad in *Superboy Starring the Legion of Super-Heroes* #203, p. 22, for instance, promises that the advertised reprint is "an exact copy of the original! The 1st time Wonder Woman ever appeared in a

way for comic publishers to distribute products directly to comic book fans as a niche market. The second was the rise of the trade paperback and graphic novel.

In fact, after the *Famous First Editions* line ceased publication, the next major sea-change in the sale and marketing of reprinted material was the emergence of the trade paperback in the mid-1980s. Beginning as collections of critically acclaimed series such as *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen* and more independent fair such as *Maus*, trade paperbacks and hard-cover collections have become a vital component of the publishing aspect of the comic book industry. Indeed trade paperback collections of comic series and mini-series can be found in many general booksellers and are increasingly becoming one of the most common ways to encounter superhero comics outside of specialty stores. As of January 2005, for instance, Amazon.com listed 1350 superhero graphic novels available for purchase, while the sale of graphic novels has become important enough to warrant its own category in Diamond Comics Distributors' monthly breakdown of comic book sales.[81]

Trade paperbacks, at least those released by Marvel and DC, tend to fall into one of two categories. The first category is the compilation of a number of recent issues, generally six, of a popular title—or a title that the publisher believes will do well as a trade paperback even if the sale of its individual issues has not been stellar—that are repackaged to be sold to readers who either missed it when it was initially coming out or chose to 'wait for the trade.' The second category is the compilation of 'greatest hits' or books that collect the adventures of a character in chronological order. Collections of DC reprints like *Crisis on Multiple Earths* (August, 2002), *The Greatest Superman Stories*

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comic!!."

Ever Told (February,1988), or *Superman: From the Thirties to the Seventies* (1971), are composed of selections of older stories revolving around a given character, time period, or theme. The key and telling distinction between the two categories is that 'greatest hits' or archival style collections make an explicit claim to represent the past.

The important point is that with the emergence of the trade paperback and hard cover collection as crucial, and some would say preferred, forms of comic publication most of the stigma attached to reprints as cheap or inauthentic has largely disappeared.[82] This is not to say that 'original' comic books published in pamphlet form are no longer the locus for most comic book collecting. Rather it is to stress that reprints are no longer looked at simply as degraded copies of an original. Indeed, in some cases the value of an original issue has been boosted by its reprinting in trade paperback form and the subsequent interest in the original book due to the success of the trade paperback.

With the archive series, DC has managed to turn collections of its old material into a luxury item. In 1989, DC began its hardcover *DC Archive* series of reprints with the publication of *Superman Archives* volume one.[83] This first archive edition was in part a portion of the products and events designed to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *Superman*'s creation and in part an attempt to capitalize on the resurgence of interest in comic books leading up to and following the release of Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989). The advertisements for *Superman Archives* volume one promised a highly faithful

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[81] Diamond Comics Distributors is the main distributor of comic books for the direct market. It's website, containing a plethora of comic book sales information, can be found at http://www.diamondcomics.com/
[82] The emergence of the term 'pamphlet' to describe comics printed in the traditional, magazine, form amongst certain comic fans and collectors, usually used with a slightly derogatory edge, points to the increasing preference for trade paperback and hardcover editions in some circles. See Andrew Wheelers' editorial at the Ninth Art website at **http://www.ninthart.com/display.php?article=740**, for instance.

[83] It is important to note that Marvel had began its similar series of premium reprints, *Marvel Masterworks* a year earlier.

reproduction of the first four issues of *Superman*'s first solo title *Superman*.[84] The

Superman Archives series was quickly supplemented by the *Batman Archives* in 1990.

Echoing sentiments expressed in the initial advertising push for *Superman*

Archives volume one, the advertisements for *Batman Archives* stressed the "Painstaking

Restoration," "Exacting Quality Control," "Faithful Recoloring," "70 LB. Archival

Paper," and "Foil Stamped Case-Binding," of the *DC Archives* line. Like *Superman*

Archives volume one, the first volume of the *Batman Archives* reproduced the first two

years of *Batman* stories published in *Detective Comics* between 1939 and 1941.

Following the success of these two series, the line was expanded in 1991 to include the

All Star Archives (featuring the adventures of the golden age super-team the Justice

Society of America), the *Justice League of America Archives*, and *The Legion of Super-*

Heroes Archives. Since then the line has been expanding, with the exception of a slow

down between 1994 and 1997, and currently releases an average of twelve titles per

year.[85] Priced at $39.95 (US) and distributed through the direct market, the *DC Archives*

line has been the culmination of DC's practice of repackaging its older, and often rare,

stories in collections aimed at a market more discerning and deep pocketed than its

traditional market of children and young adults.

Unlike the compilations of 'greatest stories,' each hardcover volume of the *DC*

Archive reproduces a run of issues reprinted in chronological order. The in-house

advertising for the first offerings in the *DC Archives* insisted on the quality of the product

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[84] see *Legion of Super-Heroes* volume 3, #1, November 1989, p. 31 for the advertisement. *Superman* #1-4 were published in late 1939. The first issue, appropriately enough, was largely reprints of the characters' first four adventures in *Action Comics*.

[85] The best source of information I have found on the Archive series comes from an unofficial *DC Archives* web page: Stepp, David, W., *The DC Archive Edition Home Page*, 2002, at <http://mywebpages.comcast.net/dstepp14/DCArchives.htm>.

it featured, clearly attempting to frame the line's products as prestigious items. Certainly the choice of name for the line, with the implications of completeness and a sober compilation of historical material implied by the word 'archive' sets such a tone. Tastefully pointing out such features as its hard cover, smyth-sewn and glued binding, the 70 pound archival paper each volume is printed on and, in the case of *Batman Archives* volume one, an introduction by a comic historian, the advertising for this line tries to establish it as a series of high quality products targeted at serious, discerning collectors and aficionados.[86]

However, in addition to the change in the apparent value of reprints, or at least the shift from filler to collector's commodity, since the 1960's evident in the advertising for the *DC Archives line* there is a second tendency worth considering. Within the various text pages that frame most of the archives, and similar collections of reprints, there is an inevitable contextualizing of the stories reproduced. Here the appeal is not made to the collector, but to the fan or potential fan.

This textual framing can range from a rather dry listing of when and where the stories first appeared, often listing creator credits which did not appear on the originals, to a hyperbolic claim for the importance of the reproduced stories to the history of a given title or even comic book history in general. Another recurring device is to use the text page to provide an overall publication history of the character or characters featured in the reprint. There would seem to be more of a pedagogic intention to educate new readers in the history and lore of a given comic or to provide knowledge about and the opportunity to read older stories to new converts than to reward the doggedly faithful fans

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[86] see: *Legion of Super-Heroes* volume 3, #1, November 1989, p. 31 and *Legion of Super-Heroes*, volume 3, #8, June 1990, p. 13

who already know a title's history and may have caught the reprinted stories the first time around. Indeed, the contribution of such text pages within comic books to the production of fans will be touched upon in the next chapter.

An example of the kind introductions found in products of the *DC Archive* line is Mike Gold's introduction to the first volume of the *Legion of Super-Heroes Archives*. Here the highlights are Gold's nostalgic remembrances of his early experiences reading the reprinted books interspersed with a discussion of the state of the comic book industry of the day and his perception of the legion's role within it. Given the previously mentioned expense and relatively narrow market for the *DC Archives*, it seems likely that this introduction is, in many respects, merely preaching to the converted. Nevertheless, the drive to inform fans, or at least confirm what they already know, about these books remains an important discursive feature of the reprint title.[87]

That the target audience of the *DC Archives* line is the pool of already knowledgeable comic book fans is further borne out if one looks at the information available about purchasers of archive editions and the marketing of the line. A recent survey of *DC Archives* purchasers conducted by the unofficial *DC Archives* website indicates that

> the Average Archive consumer is in his mid-30's according to
>
> several years worth of DC Archive Survey data… This population
>
> distribution likely reflects the fact that most of the Archived material is of
>
> a vintage that 30-somethings would recognize and find appealing. Also,
>
> given the $30-50 needed to purchase an Archive, a certain amount of

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[87] Gold, Mike, "Foreword," in *Legion of Super-Heroes Archives*, Vol. 1, New York: DC Comics, 1991.

disposable income is required. That level of income usually requires a little "seasoning" to come up with.[88]

This finding is explained by the surveyor as reflecting not only the increased income of older readers but also the specialized tastes of an *Archives* collector. He states that "whether or not the DC Archives appeal to one is a matter of individual taste. They are reprinted material which has both the advantage and disadvantage of being older material. If you can't watch 'Casablanca' because it's old, you may not find the Archives to your liking. On the other hand, if you like classics, Archives may be exactly what you're looking for... Obviously, Golden and Silver Age material was written for a different audience in a different time. Some of the material transcends generational differences while some is arguably an acquired taste."[89] One can see that from the description of the average *DC Archives* purchaser as being an older, seasoned, individual possessing both a decent income and an acquired taste for 'classics' and 'vintage' material that the *DC Archives* line is aimed at a particular kind of connoisseur-fan who has sufficient fiscal means.

Outside of the observations of this surveyor, whose survey may or may not be statistically valid, the impression of the *DC Archives* line being targeted at discriminating collectors is further reinforced if one looks at the in-house advertisements for the line's debut. As mentioned previously, the initial advertisements for the line stressed such features as their hard covers, smyth-sewn and glued bindings, the 70 pound archival paper each volume is printed on and, in the case of *Batman Archives* volume one, an introduction by a comic historian. Additionally, the advertisements insist upon the

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[88] See the FAQ's section of Stepp, David, W., *The DC Archive Edition Home Page*, 2002, at http://mywebpages.comcast.net/dstepp14/DCArchives.htm

fidelity of the reproductions contained within; as if attempting to convince the potential

consumer that they are not purchasing a, cheap, diminished copy stripped of the aura of

the original but a quality product possessing a status of value all its own. Taken together,

the advertisements for this line clearly attempt to establish it as a high quality product

targeted at serious, discerning, connoisseur comic book collectors. [90]

Thus, one can argue that the *DC Archives* line was created and advertised with

such stress on the quality of both their contents and physical form so as to legitimize their

consumption and display by veritable comic book connoisseurs. Indeed, the conductor of

the survey mentioned above writes, on his Frequently-Asked-Questions page: "The DC

Archives, because of the trade dress format, works reasonably well as a large extended

set or can be easily viewed as smaller collections. DC trade dress is an elegant,

understated design: a black cover with white pinstripes as a background and the feature

character in a designated color on the front cover. This format allows the display of the

books as a large set"[91] In his opinion at least, the *DC Archives* line has not only been

marketed as a collectable but as something worth displaying upon a book shelf.

If one accepts that the purchasers of high quality reprint lines like *DC Archives*,

are, at least for the most part, established fans then one has to ask the question: what

appeals are made to these individuals sense of connoisseurship, beyond the material

quality and price of the product? From the standpoint of a collector interested in financial

gain, it is unlikely that *DC Archives* books will increase dramatically in value as they

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[89] Ibid.

[90] See *Legion of Super-Heroes* volume 3, #1, November 1989, p. 31 and *Legion of Super-Heroes*, volume 3, #8, June 1990, p. 13.

[91] http://mywebpages.comcast.net/dstepp14/DCArchives.htm

remain, albeit high quality, reproductions of highly desired or at least very rare, original books. So what is it that makes these books desirable to fans?

As mentioned earlier, a crucial component to the definition of fans—along with several other types of 'special' consumers—is the acquisition and use of highly specialized knowledge about the objects of their passion. For fans of comic books there are several areas of knowledge that one may become an expert in. Many fans have, for instance, a detailed knowledge of important and interesting comic book creators at their fingertips, and the *DC Archives* line certainly caters to such connoisseurship. An example at my disposal would be the foreword to *Legion of Super-Heroes Archives*, volume 6, that features a biography of Curt Swan, to whom the book is dedicated, a noted *Legion* and *Superman* artist.[92]

However, the area of specialized knowledge that the *DC Archives* line most obviously draws on to make its appeal to fans is a knowledge and consciousness of comic book—and more specifically the North American superhero genre's—history. To a certain extent, this is evident from the very name of the line. The word 'archive' can, in the case of *DC Archives*, be read as denoting both the source of the reprints (i.e. DC's back catalogue of stories) and as an attempt to legitimize the books as having a value as historical documents, even if the titles only provide access to comic book history. Further, given the substantial differences in storytelling techniques between contemporary, Golden and Silver Age comics, some form of historical consciousness is arguably necessary to acquire the textual competency and taste needed to appreciate the material reprinted in the *DC Archives*.

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[92] *Legion of Super-Heroes Archives*, vol. 6, (New York: DC Comics, 1996), foreword by Roger Stern p. 5-7.

Outside of the *DC Archives* line itself, it is not difficult to find evidence that knowledge of the history of American comic books is considered an important part of comic book fandom. To a certain extent, this is because accounts of the history of comics, and the super-hero genre in particular, are ubiquitous in both comic books themselves and secondary materials aimed at fans. Even that most profane document of comic book collecting and fandom, the price guide, contains a brief account of the medium and the industry's history.[93] Similarly, comic books, like James Robinson, Paul Smith, and Richard Ory's four part *The Golden Age* or Guardians of Order Inc.'s superhero roleplaying game *Silver Age Sentinels* play on the knowledge of comic book history that even the most cursory fan of comic books can be expected to know. As the next chapter will show acquiring and distributing this knowledge is the domain of a wide range of storytelling techniques, products, and fan activity.

In conclusion, this chapter has attempted to trace the development of DC comic reprints from their inception as a way to resell to a mass market to high-priced specialty items sold to a niche market. I have also tried to argue that a crucial element of this development has been the emergence of comic book fandom as a—and it can be argued is now *the*—market for such products. Although it would appear that serious comic fans were either not numerous or visible enough to be considered an audience worth catering to during the 1960's, by the 1970's DC was, through items like their *Famous First* line, directly addressing fandom and assembling reprints specifically for serious fans. Finally, with the *DC Archives* line, it can be argued that the reprint has been rehabilitated as a document of comic book history available to discerning fans.

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[93] See "A Century of Comics," by Pat S. Calhoun in *Overstreet*, 25th ed., p. A-107-A-123, or "A Chronology of the Development of The American Comic Book," by M. Thomas Inge in *Overstreet*, 27th ed,

In terms of the overall project of this thesis, this study of the repackaging of old material by a major comic book publisher has served several purposes. It has tried to establish a tendency within comic book publishing that may seem to contradict the observations of the first chapter of this thesis. One of the conclusions of the previous chapter was that because of the need to keep their character properties accessible to a mass market—and therefore desirable to potential licensees—comic book publishers are driven to radically reinvent their characters, often resulting in decades of previous stories being erased from a comic line's 'official history.'

However, these stories do not truly go away. Rather the tendency in recent years has been to repackage them as representative of comic book history and market them to the very fans who may have been upset by their removal from a company's canon of 'official' stories. Going back further than the introduction of luxury reprints, it can be argued that reprints have allowed past material, that is explicitly marked as belonging to the past, to maintain a presence in the landscape of published comic books. Indeed, with the introduction of products like the *DC Archive* line, it appears that the very historical nature of reprints has become reified as a luxury good. As the activities of early fandom and the appetite of contemporary fandom for expensive reprint volumes shows, an awareness of comic books past has long been a part of comic fandoms' present.

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p. A-72-A-78.

Chapter Three

Superpowered Pedagogy:

Or How to Become a Comic Book Fan

Without a Gamma Bomb

"You know the way little kids learn about Spider-Man? From their pyjamas! It
was always the leading pyjama... Spider-Man works for all ages, all countries,
everywhere around the world. It's maybe the best-known intellectual property character,
on a worldwide basis. It goes as young as little kids, and as old as you and me... You
know, we live in one of the most creative countries in the world. But look around you and
*see how few characters have been introduced and survived. You have **Star Wars**, maybe*
***Star Trek**, and you'll be hard-pressed to name other characters that survived that long."*
A sales pitch by Avi Arad, current Chief Creative Officer at Marvel Comics, as quoted in
Comic Wars: How Two Tycoons Battled over the Marvel Comics Empire- And Both
Lost by Dan Raviv, (New York: Broadway Books, 2001), p. 177.

"Who are these people?
Elongated Man? FireHawk? FlameBird? Sue Dibny? Who the hell are these people?
Granted, I'm not exactly a DC fanboy but Jesus, if DC is ever going to gain market share,
they should be more inclusive of readers who are not as learned in DCU. With all the
press this book is getting, you'd think they would capitalize on that. Nope. You need a
PhD in comicdom trivia to get through your average DC book. Well, until Oracle beats
Flash in the 110m hurdles, Make Mine Marvel."
Posted 06-10-2004 on Newsarama.com's Identity Crisis thread by Len Cage

The first chapter of this thesis argued that in order to better understand the mainstream American comic book industry, and the superhero genre that has become nearly synonymous with it, superhero characters must be looked at as character properties. That is to say that the industry is just as, if not more, focused on the creation and maintenance of easily recognizable, trademarked, characters that can be licensed out to appear on a variety of products across a variety of media than it is upon the actual publication of comic books themselves. For the industry, however, this presents nearly as many difficulties as opportunities. It must constantly try to keep its character properties accessible and relevant to a public that is broader than the core group of fans who regularly purchase the titles featuring a given character in order to keep their character properties attractive to potential licensees.

This drive can profoundly affect the content of the actual comic books a publisher produces. This is particularly true when it is seen to be necessary to make a title more accessible or interesting to new readers. This can take the form of streamlining a title's continuity in order to reduce the amount of back story a new reader needs to follow a title or of altering a title's look, themes or content in an attempt to make the book and its characters more relevant to contemporary audiences.[94] It is also increasingly common for comic books that have been the basis of successful film or television projects to be

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[94] As a reminder, one can think of comic book continuity as a kind of meta-text that each individual superhero title plays a role in constituting, changing and maintaining. It is the sum total of stories considered canonical within the fictional universe of a given comic book publisher. The phenomenon of company wide continuity, as opposed to having each character exist in their own distinct world is largely a result of the interaction between characters who normally appear in distinct titles. Further, allusions to events that have occurred in different titles reinforce the sense that the events contained in any one title are only a part of the ongoing stories of a fictional community of heroes, villains, and normal humans.

altered to more greatly resemble these televisual texts.[95] This development is not surprising if one considers that the October issue of *Ultimate Spider-Man*, the highest selling Spider-Man title, sold roughly 135, 000 units while around 12 million DVDs of the first *Spider-Man* film were sold in the first two months of their release.[96]

Nevertheless, when it comes to simplifying comic book continuity the fixes mentioned above are, at best, short term solutions. After all, even in the extreme case of 'rebooting' a character and their mythos and starting from scratch new back stories build up quickly and present many of the same difficulties that the title had before the reboot was implemented. The tendency of American superhero comics to assume that their readership possesses some expository knowledge and, indeed, the very build up of a back story that requires mastery stems at least in part from their serial form. Thus, although it may be easier to master the four or so years of continuity that *Ultimate Spider-Man* has accrued than the forty-two years of *Amazing Spider-Man*, current issues of *Ultimate Spider-Man* do require a certain amount of familiarity with the character and his four years of Ultimate line history. Further, as the previous chapter tried to demonstrate, an awareness of, and an appetite for, comic books from the past have long been an important aspect of becoming a comic book fan.

Beyond the bare minimum of information required to follow a recent issue of a superhero comic other elements of a title or even the medium's history is often in play in

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[95] A Recent example is the reworking of Superman's backstory in *Superman: Birthright* to more closely resemble the WB's *Smallville*, including introducing the character of Chloe Sullivan into the comic book mythos for the first time. Spiderman has also recently undergone a film inspired facelift, giving him organic webshooters, as in the film, replacing the mechanical gadgets he used between 1962 and 2004.

[96] See Weiland, Jonah, "Top Sales Charts For Actual Sales in October, 2004," at *Comic Book Resources*, 12 November, 2004, at <www.comicbookresources.com/news/newsitem.cgi?id=4418> for information on recent comic book sales and Hanson, Eric, "'Spider-Man' has launched Marvel on another marvelous ride," 6 October, 2003, at *Comic Book Movie* at <http://www.comicbookmovie.com/news/articles/433.asp> for info on Spider-Man's box office and DVD sales.

contemporary superhero comics. And, like other texts that attract a loyal and devoted fan-base, recognizing such fannish nods to readers 'in the know' is considered an important and pleasurable element of a knowledgeable fan's reading experience.[97] All of this is to say that, despite the best efforts of the American comic book industry to keep their characters easily accessible to new readers, knowledge about the history of comic book characters, the superhero genre, and, to a certain extent, the medium itself is beneficial, and to a certain extent necessary, to read contemporary superhero narratives.

However, as the two quotes that opened this chapter hopefully illustrated, it is not a matter of simply possessing this knowledge or not. There is a wide spectrum of possible levels of familiarity with the genre and its characters and a range of products targeted at readers, or in some cases non-readers, across this spectrum. This chapter will attempt to explore both ends of this spectrum of comic book knowledge and the role it plays in the genre and the industry.

Essentially this discussion will revolve around two distinct but related areas. The first area I will explore is textual competency, what it is, how one acquires it, and what special demands the superhero genre makes on this concept. The second area is an examination of the processes by which events in the stories of superheroes become privileged and canonized as 'stories that count.' In other words, how do comic book characters acquire the convoluted histories that some fans adore and others see as the biggest stumbling block to bringing in new readers? Linking these two areas will be an

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[97] See chapter 4 "Comics Literacy: Creating Culture through Content" of Pustz, Matthew J., *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999) for a discussion of some of the ways that comic book knowledge circulates in contemporary comics. See Jenkins, Henry, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 10 and 17 and Hills, Matt, *Fan Cultures*, (New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 10-11 for some discussion of the importance of text specific knowledge to fans of various cultural objects.

examination of the genre's tendency to frequently reference and retell certain narratives. Ultimately, I will argue that this knowledge of the characters and their histories is essential to the experience of the superhero narrative for many readers. Further I believe that the techniques of referencing and retelling, two of the most commonly used tools for giving new readers this kind of knowledge, are integral to the very process by which the potentially forgotten stories of a character become sedimented of a character's history. A useful place to begin this is with a brief discussion of what I mean by textual and genre competency.

Peter Rabinowitz, a reader-response theorist, has asserted that it is useful for critics to begin their readings of a text by considering the general, historical, cultural and genre specific knowledge an author seems to assume that their audience will use to make sense of their work.[98] As totality, he labels this knowledge literary competence. Following this he argues that differing kinds and levels of literary competence are necessary to construct 'authorial' readings of different texts.[99] In simple terms, Rabinowitz's competent authorial reading is meant to consist of the most basic meanings—in terms of the events of a plot, characters and references to objects and places—one arguably must know what a submarine is before one can understand *Hunt for the Red October* (1990)—that an author appears to assume their audience will make.

Within American superhero comics, there are roughly two areas of assumed knowledge I would like to highlight. The first can be labeled narrative/expository knowledge. The narrative/expository knowledge that comic book readers are usually

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[98] Rabinowitz, Peter, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*, (1987) excerpt reprinted in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 2nd edition, David H. Richter ed, (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998), p. 999.
[99] Ibid, p. 1002.

assumed to command consists of things like knowing the events of previous issues and story arcs, particularly if one is reading an issue mid-way through a story line, along with knowing who the main characters and supporting cast are and their relationships with each other. Narrative/expository knowledge is made even more important in superhero comics because of the tendency of them to refer to stories, events and characters that appeared in issues published years, if not decades, prior.

The second area of assumed knowledge is genre/formal knowledge. As will be discussed below, a certain assumed generic competency is common to most genre texts and the belief that most textual consumers possess this competency underpins much of the work on film, television and literary genre. In the case of superhero comics this knowledge would range from a familiarity with the genre's iconography and narrative conventions (if you don't see the bad guy's body, he isn't dead) to the cognitive ability to read the combination of words and pictures that is the conventional comic book.

With this brief discussion of what kinds of knowledge comic book readers are expected to be competent in, we can move onto the concept of genre and/or textual competence itself. The concept of readers and audience members being competent in the lore and conventions of genre texts is one that is often used in much film and literary theory, although rarely explored to any great degree. Although it is true that in the case of genre theory there are, arguably, much larger theoretical questions with which to grapple. Examples of unresolved, and possibly unresolvable, theoretical issues in genre theory include such chestnuts as at what level genres exist, if they do at all, and how one identifies either a genre or a genre text. Nevertheless, although many theorists may have wildly differing opinions on these subjects, if they address them at all, a reliance on some

notion of genre competency does seem to underlie much modern work on genre.[100] Given

that genre competence seems to be an important, but relatively under-theorised concept to

contemporary genre theory, I will be drawing primarily on two theorists who have placed

genre competence at the centre of their work: Thomas J. Roberts and Laura Stempel

Mumford.

In Roberts' expansive, yet deeply idiosyncratic, work *An Aesthetics of Junk*

Fiction Roberts makes the notion of genre competency more explicit and central than

most other theorists in the same area. One of the recurring arguments in *An Aesthetics of*

Junk Fiction is that genre fiction is "*a literature without texts*. This is to say that it is a

literature even when it is not giving us stories that are distinguished in their own right."[101]

Echoing the statements of many others, Roberts points out the importance of reading

genre texts in the context of the genres they participate in. While any one genre text may

not be remarkable on its own, it nevertheless interacts with previous iterations of a genre

through its use of conventions, iconography and other generic markers.[102]

Thus, Roberts believes that it is necessary to be familiar with a genre in order to

appreciate even its most mediocre representative. Indeed, it may be even more necessary

to be familiar with a genre in order to appreciate its mediocre texts than to enjoy a

genre's masterpieces. Viewing genre as a fairly fluid system, Roberts argues that since a

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[100] Some instances of genre theorists who place emphasis on the role of generic competence, without exploring precisely what it is or how one accquires it, include: Schatz, Thomas, "Film Genre and the Genre Film," in *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*, (Dayton: Random House, 1981) p. 18-22, Sobchack, Vivian, "Genre Film: Myth, Ritual and Sociodrama," in *Film/Culture*, Sari Thomas ed, (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1982), p. 147, Neale, Steve *Genre and Hollywood*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 12, and finally, Rick Altman makes a similar claim about the commonality of the notion of genre competency, in the form of the audiences expectations and identifications of genre films, to film genre theory in *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), p. 14.

[101] Roberts, Thomas J., *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1990). P. 5, italics in original.

genre's conventions can only continue to exist as long as they are made use of by new texts and that generic change only occurs when a text veers away or actively works against an established convention when one reads a particular genre text one is reading, in a sense, the entire system behind it.

In this sense, he argues that a certain genre competency is necessary to understand or appreciate nearly any genre text. As Roberts put it

> every vernacular genre does produce stories that are slightly or deeply
>
> unintelligible to the newcomer, that just as there is a skill and lore required
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> to read literature, there is for each genre a genre competency... every story
>
> in popular genre is referring deliberately or unconsciously to every other
>
> story in that genre. Most of what seems inexcusably unintelligible in
>
> popular fiction is crystal clear to the people who have learned to read it.[103]

Indeed, the quote at the beginning of this chapter from the reader bewildered by the array of obscure characters mobilised in *Identity Crisis* #1 can be seen as an example of a reader who has not learned to read within the system of the DC universe.

However, while most genre theorists agree that genre competency is expected from the audience of genre texts and that genre texts are often made to conform or break with audience expectations, few theorists have explored how one becomes competent in a genre or how this competency comes into play when someone views or reads a genre text. This is what makes Roberts different from other writers on genre as he makes competency a fairly central component of his work on genre fiction. As noted above,

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[102] Roberts, 150-151. For two genre theorists who echo Roberts' statements see: Neale, 217-219, or Sobchack,, p. 147.

Roberts makes it fairly clear that, in his view, genre texts are intended to be read as a part of a generic tradition and that their interaction with this tradition is a source of a great deal of the pleasure these texts provide to their consumers.[104] Beyond the central role in the reading processes Roberts gives genre competency, he is also one of the few theorists to address how one becomes competent. Not surprisingly, he stresses the importance of being exposed to large numbers of genre texts as the best way to learn about its forms and conventions. Indeed, James Gunn's observation that to understand science fiction it is enough to read around one hundred books is a recurring motif in *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction.*[105]

Using the term genre mapping to refer to the acquisition of the knowledge necessary to be genre competent, Roberts argues that the more one reads of a genre the more likely one is to be comfortable with it. With this comfort comes the capacity to spot a genre's mutations and a genre text's intertextual references. As one reads increasing numbers of genre stories Roberts claims that one is "able to understand stories as functions,... able to read pleasurably inside the system. The ability to read competently in a genre is the ability to recognize in a story what is new and what is not... [new readers] see the features that distinguish the stories in this genre from the stories in other genres; experienced readers are focusing on what distinguishes this story from other stories in the same genre."[106] While one may question whether experienced readers actually pore over genre texts looking for novelty over how it participates in a genre's tradition, Robert's

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[103] Roberts, p. 60. The concept of literary competency, as put forward by Peter Rabinowitz is commonly referred to in much of the reader response theory

[104] Interestingly, Roberts claims that an unfamiliarity with a genre's conventions and traditions is often responsible for unpleasurable misreadings of genre texts, particularly by academics. Roberts, p. 60 and see p. 81 for a catty note on genre ignorant academic scholars.

[105] Roberts p. 18.

[106] Roberts, p. 214.

basic point, that exposure to a large number of genre texts is what makes one able to notice the novel in the first place, seems sound.[107]

In terms of this vision of genre mapping, whereby one has to read large numbers of texts to become familiar with a genre, I have only one minor issue. This is, quite simply, that not all texts are created equal in terms of informing a new reader about a genre and its conventions. Certain genre texts that are self-consciously generic and announce themselves as such, (parodies, for example), can arguably provide a valuable catalogue of conventions for the novice.

As Laura Stempel Mumford points out about the soap opera "the generic rules circulate so broadly via prime-time serials, parodies, feature films, commercial allusions, and other references that few viewers with any experience of mainstream popular culture can now be truly incompetent in the form."[108] I believe this statement could be said to be true of many genres, such as detective stories, horror films or, of course, the superhero genre. In other words, while it may be necessary to read or view dozens of genre texts to understand its nuances, texts like parodies are unique in that they simultaneously appeal

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[107] To further elaborate on his concept of competence, Roberts even traces out a loose taxonomy of genre readers, ranging from genre allergics to exclusivists, and lists the kind of knowledge about a genre each type may have. Thus, for example, he claims that users, the second most dedicated readers of genre fiction, have an in depth knowledge of several genres, but often feel shamed by their compulsive addiction to certain kinds of texts. Occasional readers, on the other hand, are described by Roberts as either fans of one particular author or book, new to a genre or are nostalgic former exclusivists or users seeking to recapture their youth. In all three cases, Roberts is quick to circumscribe the competency of occasional readers. These readers, he claims, are prone to misunderstanding a genre's conventions and are not a reliable source of information on a genre. While I appreciate the importance Roberts accords genre competency in his work, I have a few problems with his vision of genre mapping and his taxonomy of readers. His taxonomy is problematic for a few reasons, not the least of which is his tendency to attribute odd moral stances and behavioral patterns to the individuals in the categories he describes. A more important difficulty I have with it is that he equates consumption patterns with levels of competence. Effectively he is saying that reading nothing but science fiction automatically makes one an expert in a genre, or at least more knowledgeable than someone who reads across a couple of genres.

[108] Mumford, p. 6.

to the knowledge of genre competent individuals while giving the uninitiated the basic genre knowledge they need to be minimally competent in a genre.

Indeed, I believe that a similar and less problematic account of acquisition of genre competency and its differing levels can be found in Laura Stempel Mumford's *Love and Ideology in the Afternoon*. Like Roberts, Mumford stresses the importance of genre competency to viewing and enjoying her particular object of study, the American soap opera. The soap opera, like the contemporary superhero comics, is a serial narrative that often demands a certain amount of narrative/expository and genre/formal knowledge to be enjoyed. To illustrate this, Mumford states that

> the incompetent viewer, who knows nothing of soap opera
> convention or history, will understand little of an episode, and because of
> its self-referential, nonlinear structure, may not even be able to make sense
> of it in the most superficial way. An expert, on the other hand, will bring a
> wealth of historical memory and detailed information to the viewing
> experience, and… will if she watches attentively, understand nearly
> everything she sees: the characters, their motivations, the relationships
> among them, and thus the background and potential consequences of
> particular narrative developments.[109]

Rather than viewing competency as something one either has or doesn't have, Mumford traces out a useful spectrum of positions defined by their genre competency. Thus, for her, an incompetent viewer is one who has never seen a soap opera in their life, while an expert has had a long history with a least one program. In between these two extremes are: the novice, a newcomer to the genre with an interest in learning about it;

the casual viewer, who has some experience with the genre but no history of commitment to any one show; the irregular viewer, who has a long, but infrequent, history with the genre, and, finally, the competent viewer who has regular viewing habits and some history, but lacks the detailed knowledge and years of experience of the expert. She then makes the claim that most soap operas are produced with competent to expert viewers in mind. A claim that can, I think, be extended to cover other genre texts as well.[110]

Mumford also stresses that this schema is highly subjective, relative and far from absolute. Some viewers who would normally be labeled 'experts' may only feel 'competent' when conversing with far more experienced and knowledgeable viewers. Thus, for example, I may feel like an expert comic book reader when chatting with my roommate, while barely competent when speaking with Al, the manager of my preferred comic book shop. Another area where this spectrum tends to enter highly relative territory is, as Mumford points out, that these positions tend to vary for each viewer depending on which soap opera one discusses.[111] Thus one person can be an expert viewer of *The Young and the Restless*, an infrequent viewer of *General Hospital* and a casual viewer of *Passions*.

It must be stressed, however, that this schema of incompetent to expert viewers or readers refers only to being versed in genre specific knowledge. In this sense genre competency may be considered a subset of a more general textual or literary competency. I do not believe, for instance, that it is Mumford's intention to label a Shakespeare scholar a generally incompetent reader because they are unfamiliar the conventions of the soap opera. Rather, this spectrum of genre competencies seems premised upon the idea

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[109] Mumford, p. 5.
[110] Ibid, p. 5-6.

that any given genre text may call upon enough genre specific knowledge that even a person well versed in the traditional literary canon cannot be guaranteed to be an expert *genre* reader.

Further, in the case of superhero comics and, I suspect, soap operas one should emphasise that genre knowledge is not the only body of knowledge that a genre text draws upon. Much more general literary or cultural sources are usually in play as well. This is obvious if one considers a story like "Ghosts" that staged a Halloween themed play on Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* with Bruce Wayne taking the role of Scrooge.[112] Beyond such direct uses of other cultural sources, many comics are in one way or another inflected by other traditions, genres, or discourses.

Although it is important to acknowledge that genres do not exist in isolation and that a genre text may draw upon multiple bodies of knowledge and competencies I believe that acknowledging that genre specific knowledge does exist and plays an important role in the consumption of genre texts is equally important. To view it otherwise is to invite the kind of cultural chauvinism associated with the traditional high/low culture split by devaluing or ignoring the specialised knowledge and competencies of the soap opera viewer, comic book fan, or reader of crime novels. I feel that exploring these specialised knowledges and their acquisition are important since, for instance, public education and the power of literary tradition ensures that nearly everyone is familiar with King Lear while only a comic book devotee could be expected to know Captain Cold.

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[111] Ibid, p. 6.
[112] Loeb, Jeph, Sale, Tim "Ghosts" in *Batman: Ghosts- Legends of the Dark Knight Halloween Special*, 1995.

Mumford also opens up the processes of acquiring genre competency to more than just being exposed to large numbers of genre texts over a long period of time. Mumford argues that novice viewers are often able to gain insight into a given soap opera's history, or the genre as a whole, through discussions with other, more competent, viewers or secondary publications such as *Soap Opera Digest*.[113] Perhaps most importantly, Mumford argues that certain conventions of the genre lend themselves to familiarizing novice viewers, such as expository dialogue and repetition. Thus she argues that "in a sense these viewers- or better, their competence as viewers- are a creation of the text itself, for it is through watching soaps that we gain the experience necessary to decode further episodes and new series. A soap opera teaches us how to watch it, tutors us in its rules and conventions, provides us with the history and information we need, and thus makes it possible for us to understand it in the future."[114]

While I would agree that exposure to copious amounts of superhero texts is probably the most common way in which readers become competent, there are other ways. Superhero comics, as a genre and an industry, have developed specific techniques to ease an individual from being a novice to a competent reader. Although all of the techniques Mumford listed for the soap opera, (expository dialogue, speaking with other viewers, watching parodies), are valid for the superhero comic as well, the remainder of this chapter will focus on two techniques that, while not unique to the superhero comic, have taken on a unique character within superhero comics.

These two techniques, that I will label retelling and referencing, often transmit, at the very least, the minimum amount of genre knowledge, textual history and information,

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[113] Ibid, p. 7.
[114] Ibid, p. 7.

both visual and narrative, about comic book characters and the stories they feature in. The range of activities I have in mind for this area stretches from the reproduction of superhero emblems and images on products ranging from coffee mugs to pyjamas to the retelling and adaptation of important narratives from the mythos of a superhero across a variety of mediums. Beyond informing new readers, these techniques also serve a second function. This other function is to establish which fictional adventures are important or have been established as having happened within a given character's or publisher's continuity. Indeed, I would argue that an American comic book narrative is only constituted as important if it is retold or sufficiently referenced; becoming a narrative easily known, often through second or third generation accounts, to the most casual of fans.[115]

Uricchio and Pearson point out in their essay "I'm Not Fooled By That Cheap Disguise" that mainstream American comic book characters rarely have a single ur-text, written by an authoritative author, to which one can turn to find their definitive adventures or characteristics. Rather they insist that these characters exist in a wide range of equally valid texts and are stabilized only by the recurrence of their physical appearances and certain other traits.[116] Although they do point out that one of the traits that shore up these characters are the events that are chronicled in their fictional adventures. In particular, they claim that "two different kinds of events constitute this

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[115] One of the most common systems of referencing within comics, the in-panel footnote steering readers to the previous issues wherein an important story or character appeared, was until recently probably the most important way of conveying both narrative/expository information and shoring up important events. However, perhaps reflecting the greater emphasis on comic books as art (and thus not wanting to clutter up the page) or the assumption that most comics are just preaching to the converted, these footnotes have all but died out since the mid-1990's.

[116] Uricchio and Pearson, "I'm Not Fooled By That Cheap Disguise," in *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media*, Pearson and Uricchio eds, (Routledge: New York, 1991) p. 184-5.

component: fixed and accruing events, such as the origin story, and iterative, that is repetitive, non-identical and non-accruing events, most of which involve crime fighting."[117] Despite this move, however, the essay tends to stress the post-modern instability of superhero characters, in this case Batman, and their status as valuable trademarks over the corporate and generic moves made to stabilize their identities and histories. Indeed, given the proliferation of cross media Batmen it seems less remarkable to me that there a variety of different Batmen circulating in popular culture than it is that DC has managed to keep the character's identity and meaning as stable as they have.

In this light, I would argue that it is the accruing category of events identified by Pearson and Uricchio that are vital to keeping the characters stable and their histories knowable. The question left unanswered in their essay, regarding this question is, how do events accrue? I would argue that it is the tendency for these events to be retold over and over again that causes them to become fixed, accrued, stories which then form the, more or less, static backbone of a character's mythos. If a story is never referenced or retold after its initial publication, exhibition or broadcast it may as well have never happened outside, of course, of the memories of individual fans. Other stories, on the other hand, like *Batman* meeting *Robin* or the second *Robin*'s messy demise so indelibly mark a character's mythos and image, through references and retellings, that they often haunt newer texts trying to get away from these elements of a character's history.

In terms of what I mean by retelling and referencing, I hope the following definitions are helpful. Retellings are fairly straightforward to define. A retelling is the retelling of a previous comic book narrative in a more recent one, often by a different creative team than had originally produced the narrative, and usually with an eye on how

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[117] Ibid, p. 186.

the older story has influenced recent or will influence future stories. As such retellings must always be looked at as interpretative readings of earlier stories that transform a story into a meaningful part of a character's history.

Referencing, on the other hand, describes a much broader range of nebulous activities. In general, I am using referencing to refer to any use of superhero characters, their iconography, or narratives in texts or products where either the use of these elements is not intended to directly tell a superhero story or they are treated within a story as common knowledge. For the most part, I intend to explore three loose sets of activities I feel fall within the umbrella of referencing.

The first is, as discussed by Avi Arad in this chapter's opening quote, the simple appearance of superhero character properties, their trademarked emblems and the like, on non-comic book merchandise. While perhaps not the deepest source of knowledge about the genre, in either the conventional or expository sense, it is the basic recognition by people, young and old, that a certain emblem or image should be equated with a superhero character property that keeps the industry rolling. On a very basic level Arad is right: it is the pyjamas, cereals, and tee shirts that give many people the knowledge of comic book characters that keeps the properties valuable trademarks.

The second kind of activity I would like to place under the referencing umbrella is, essentially, retelling writ small. This form of referencing encompasses the snippets of comic book history or, in some cases, current events that circulate both within comic books and superhero narratives in other media. From little touches like Dr. Curt Conners', aka The Lizard's, presence in *Spider-Man 2* to the use of thinly disguised *Justice League of America* analogues in books like *The Authority*, these intertextual

references serve, by their very nature as intertextual references, both to keep certain elements of the superhero genre circulating and as potential points for people inexperienced in the genre to learn about the genre and its history.

The third, and final, kind of referencing I would like to examine is the compilation of certain facts and stories about characters into reference guides. Comic books like DC's 1980's offering *Who's Who: The Definitive Directory of the DC Universe* and its more recent series of *Secret Files and Origins* specials that focus on specific characters or titles, are an important source of narrative/expository knowledge for many readers of varying levels of competence. Further, publications ranging from the fanzines and introductions to reprints discussed in the last chapter, the varied children's guides to superhero comic book characters put out by DK publishing, and *A and E*'s episodes of *Biography* that have focused on superheroes and villains do much the same work in other media for different audiences. Together, all three forms of referencing serve as useful ways to both provide novice and incompetent readers with the knowledge necessary to become more competent in the superhero genre and, in many cases, shore up the continuity of the fictional universes of comic book publishers.

With the basic definitions out of the way, let's return to retellings for a moment. In terms of length or structure, retellings can vary greatly from instance to instance. Thus, in 2002's *The Legion*, issues 12 and 13, the origin of the Legion villain C.O.M.P.U.T.O. and the story of the Legion's first encounter with him, which originally took up three full issues of team's comic book, were retold in a mere four pages.[118] This retelling, complete

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[118] See: Abnett, Dan, Lanning, Andy, and Copiel, Oliver, *The Legion* # 12, November 2002 p. 18-19, and Abnett, Dan, Lanning, Andy, and Walker, Kev, *The Legion* # 13, December 2002, p. 1 and 2, for the retelling. The story originally appeared, in current continuity, in *The Legion of Super-Heroes* Volume 4, #'s 98-100, November 1997-1998. This version of the Computo story was, in turn, a retelling of a *Legion* story

with a footnote to help readers find the original issues, served the function of giving new

readers, and reminding more experienced readers of, the minimum narrative/expository

knowledge to understand who C.O.M.P.U.T.O. was and why various members of The

Legion reacted to him as they did. Further, it established that the first story was an

accruing event by being transformed from a single story, that may have been forgotten or

ignored, into *Legion* history that needed to be retold because current narrative events

hinged upon that prior narrative.

Some retellings, on the other hand, tend to expand and embellish the story being

retold. *Superman: Birthright*, for example, is a twelve issue mini-series that retells

Superman's origin and early years. The core of Superman's origin, that he was rocketed

towards earth by his parents from the dying world of Krypton and discovered by the Kent

family in America, comprises the first issue's first seventeen pages. The last mini-series

to tell the same story, *The Man of Steel* (1986) took eight pages to send baby Kal-El to

earth. In striking contrast, the first time Superman's origin was disclosed it took up a

mere 13 panels over two pages.[119]

There are many reasons for this particular expansion and set of embellishments.

Perhaps the most obvious is that the basic techniques and grammar of comic book

storytelling have, unsurprisingly, changed dramatically since 1939 or even since 1986.

Contrasted with today's comics, the comic books of the Golden Age seem stilted and

sudden, filled with crude art and sudden transitions between panels, as the first thirty

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that had appeared in *Adventure Comics* #'s 340-341, January and February 1966, that had been erased from
contemporary continuity (it was retroactively erased from the history of the DC universe) when *The Legion*
was 'rebooted' in 1994.

[119]Waid, Mark, Yu, Leinil Francis, and Alanguilan, Gerry, *Superman: Birthright*, #1 (September 2003) p.
1-17, Byrne, John, *The Man of Steel*, #1 (July 1986) p. 1-8 and Siegel, Jerome and Shuster, Joe, *Superman*
#1 (1939) p. 1-2, as reproduced in *Superman: From the Thirties to the Seventies* (New York: Bonanza
Books), p. 20-21.

years of Clark Kent's life being squeezed into two pages may attest. Beyond formal

changes, both of the more recent retellings of Superman's origin have a much greater

focus on character development and psychology. Thus, in both *The Man of Steel* and

Birthright the reader will inevitably have a better sense of what Superman's parents were

like and the emotional difficulty of sending their child to earth than in the original version

of the origin, particularly since the parents were unnamed and unseen in *Superman #1*.

It is important to stress that book, or often mini-series, length retellings of

important or pivotal events in a superhero's fictional career are not entirely aimed at new

readers seeking to learn more about a given character. Just as often, these limited series

are as much about rewriting and revising a character's history as retelling their origins.

As has been briefly discussed in the first chapter of this thesis these revisions are usually

geared towards reworking a character that is seen to have become dated in order to make

them more palatable to contemporary audiences.

For the most part though, retellings of the secret origins of superheroes that are, at

least partially, aimed at giving new readers information about said heroes are probably

the most familiar and common form of retellings within the superhero genre, regardless

of medium. These are, perhaps, the worst kept secrets in the world. Inevitably repeated

whenever a superhero makes an appearance in a medium other than comic books, be it a

film, a novelization, an animated television series or even, in many cases, an action

figure, it would seem that the whole point of a secret origin is that it is not secret.[120] Or if,

it is, the secret is shared with every potential consumer of the narratives and merchandise

of a superheroic character property.

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[120] Uricchio and Pearson even found a version of *Batman*'s origin story encapsulated on the back of a box of cereal. See Uricchio and Pearson, p. 182-3.

I believe that this is because a comic book character's secret origin contains, perhaps, the minimum amount of information about the character, their history and the genre necessary to be a competent consumer of superhero narratives. Encapsulating the basic story and defining traits of a character, (their trademark appearance, heroic and secret identities, abilities and motivation),[121] within, in some cases, the space of a paragraph or two, the secret origin is perhaps the most effective and simple tool available to the industry to etch a character property into the memories of the public. As such, it is hardly surprising, from either a genre theory or industrial standpoint, that these narratives are repeated in as many forms, and as often as possible.

Indeed, like other retellings, recaps of a character's secret origin can range from a terse paragraph at the beginning of an issue of their magazine to limited series that revisit a character's origin in depth. Condensed retellings of a character's origin often read like the following example from a recent issue of *The Flash*:

> Caught in a bizarre accident, teenager Wally West was struck by a bolt of lightning and bathed in a strange combination of chemicals. Like his mentor, he was bestowed with the gift of incredible super-speed. After the death of his forerunner, and years of training as *Kid Flash*, Wally has inherited the identity of the scarlet speedster. Today he carries on the legacy of the fastest man alive! Today Wally West is Keystone City's greatest hero—*The Flash*.[122]

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[121] Ibid, p. 194-5.

[122] Johns, Geoff, Porter, Howard, Livesay, *The Flash* vol. 2, #209, (June, 2004) p. 3. Similarly, every issue of every title of Marvel's Ultimate line opens with a text page describing the origin of the featured character or team and recaps the situation they are currently in.

In the case of recent *Flash* comics, this paragraph appears, with little or no variation, adjacent to the title of the issue's story, usually no more than a few pages into the book.

A newcomer, with no previous experience with title, would at the very least be able to discern the title character's secret identity, origin, powers, and home town from this remarkable piece of condensed exposition. Beyond these basics, this recap of the character's origin also alludes to several key elements of this version of the Flash's thirty-plus years of history: that he got his powers as teenager, previously went by the name Kid Flash, and mentored under the last hero to go by the name of The Flash. These points, while not essential to the core of the character (a hero who can run really, really fast), are nevertheless at play in most issues of the magazine, often in the form of Wally's angst about living up to his predecessor, talking about his previous life as a sidekick, or when he deals with characters that had some form of relationship with Barry Allen, the previous Flash.

Recapping the character's history for readers unfamiliar with it arguably helps make many of the character's relationships and actions legible to new readers. It can also be seen as reinforcing that the character is not a *tabula rasa* at the beginning of each issue. The Flash as a character has a history, and this brief retelling of the origin indicates that it is important to the title's present stories. Further, these allusions to the character's history serve as guide posts to novice readers who are looking to learn more about it through shaping the questions a new reader may have. After reading this condensed version of Wally West's history, it would not be surprising if it left novice readers with questions like: who was the last Flash? Or what did Wally do as Kid Flash? In this sense,

these brief retellings can be seen almost as invitations for novice readers to look into elements of the histories of these characters.

Ultimately then, one can see retellings of important events or a character's origin within the superhero genre as serving several functions. In terms of providing readers with a level of textual competence, they provide an important amount of narrative/expository knowledge. The knowledge provided can range from the bare bones of a character's origin and identity, to important accruing events in a title's history, to in depth examinations of a character's past. In this sense, retelling is vital to both new readers seeking to become familiar with the superhero genre and to the industry's interest in keeping their characters familiar and their products legible to the widest possible audience, without alienating readers with a greater command of the history of the genre and its characters. In short, retellings illustrate that the fictional history of these characters are often in play in contemporary superhero narratives while offering new readers a point of entry into this, often dense, body of knowledge.

Secondly, retellings establish that retold events have accrued, that the retold story has taken a firmer position within comic book continuity as part of the canonized history of a character. Thus, even the brief mention of the death of the previous incarnation of The Flash, Barry Allen, within the condensed secret origin of the latest character using that name, Wally West, establishes, at minimum, that there was a previous Flash and that his death is part of the official history of the DC universe. Finally, the prevalence of retellings of parts of comic book history highlights the importance of certain past events to readers, be they more or less experienced in the genre and serve as an informal invitation for readers to learn more about these characters and their histories.

The second technique used to provide the knowledge needed to be a competent reader of superhero narratives that I would like to discuss is referencing. As discussed above, at its most basic level referencing encompasses the, nearly ubiquitous in some cases, presence of superheroes and their iconography on products and texts besides comic books. Particularly in the case of the nearly iconic characters like Superman, Batman, Spider-Man or Wonder Woman, licensed merchandise like pyjamas, wall paper, story books, or even plastic dishes made for children, ensure that many people know who these characters are and are familiar elements of their iconography on at least a purely visual level.

Due to the prevalence of these kinds of products I feel that, as Mumford observed about the soap opera, it is nearly impossible to be a truly incompetent consumer of superhero narratives. The positive side of this is, of course, that it is precisely this level of familiarity by the general public of their superhero character properties that enables the comic book industry to derive so much of its profit from licensing these characters out. Ultimately this sort of use of these characters and their iconography creates a circular system whereby the more that images of these characters circulate, the greater the public's familiarity with them is and, therefore, the greater the value of these character properties as licensable trademarks.

Along with this form of referencing, with its concern with basic recognition of superhero characters on, at least, a marketing level are two other activities that I would like to discuss and examine. To a certain extent I consider these activities, at least for the purposes of this project, more relevant. In terms of both providing narrative/expository knowledge to less experienced readers and anchoring the continuity of a publisher's

fictional universe, references to elements of superhero comic history or current events within superhero narratives are quite useful. I consider these uses references rather than retellings because they rarely take the form of narratives, even within superhero comics, and are instead usually used as though they taken for granted.

Take, for example, the transformation of Lex Luthor that has occurred since John Byrne's revisionist retelling of Superman's origin in *The Man of Steel*. From his first appearance in *Action Comics* #23 (April, 1940) until his 1986 revision at the hands of John Byrne, Lex Luthor had been a classic mad scientist type villain, using a variety of super-scientific devices to attempt to rob banks, conquer the world, and, most of all, best Superman. With his reintroduction in *The Man of Steel* #2 (July, 1986), he was substantially reworked into a ruthless corporate head, who sought power and wealth through unscrupulous business and political dealings and who came into conflict with Superman, initially, more out of jealousy than spite.

To establish throughout the DC universe that this was the new Lex Luthor and that, within DC continuity at least, this was how he had always been it was necessary to make references to the character and his fictional corporation Lexcorp across the publisher's superhero line. Further, it was necessary to restrict, if not all together suppress, references to the older mad-scientist version of the character. By the late eighties, it is unlikely that many DC readers could have escaped learning about the new Lex Luthor either through subtle references to him in other books, reading the most recent edition of DC's *Who's Who,* or seeing the Donald Trump inspired ads for his solo origin book *The Unauthorized Biography of Lex Luthor*. However, educating DC readers about the new, corporate cut-throat, Lex Luthor and anchoring his place within DC

continuity through these kinds of references were only part of the picture of establishing this version of the character.

In nearly all of the subsequent appearances of Superman and his mythos in media other than comic books, this is the version of the character that has been used.[123] Thus in *Lois and Clark*, *Superman: The Animated Series* (and the related *Justice League* and *Batman: The Animated Series*), and the current *Smallville* television series, the corporate *Lex Luthor* was utilised. This can be seen as serving two purposes. The first is that it had the pedagogical effect of establishing and naturalising this version of the character in the minds of the public beyond comic book readers, effectively giving them narrative/expository knowledge necessary to read current Superman comic books. The second is that by having this version of the character appear as *the* version of Lex Luthor in so many comic book texts and television appearances it has become anchored within the ever fluid continuity of the DC universe.

The final type of referencing that serves as a source of narrative/expository knowledge for consumers of superhero narratives of all levels of competence that I would like to discuss is the presence of this information in texts explicitly created as superhero reference guides. These texts can take many forms. There are, for instance, fan produced indices of certain superhero titles, like *The Official Teen Titans Index* produced by the Independent Comics Group in 1985, or fan internet sites like *The Quasi-Official Index to the Legion of Super-Heroes* offered at http://home.nycap.rr.com/lshindex/, and other sites that offer more general guides to favourite characters and titles.

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[123] The only possible exception I can think of is the use of the character in the syndicated *Superboy* series of 1988-1991.

The two major comic book companies have also regularly published comic books featuring illustrations, biographies and power listings for their major characters as guides to readers. DC's 1980's offering, *Who's Who*, for instance, was subtitled "the definitive directory of the DC Universe."[124] Such books not only provided information on the company's myriad of characters but, as the self-described "definitive directory of the DC Universe," can be seen as working to fix the histories and versions of the characters that appeared in its pages as the authoritative versions. At present, such guides to a publisher's universe and its characters containing much the same information can be found at their websites. Indeed, a recent promotional piece printed in all of DC's comics published in July, 2004, about its website told readers to "be on the lookout for a new, comprehensive online newsletter, more Secret Files profiles of DC's greatest heroes and vilest villains, plus website exclusive video interviews with comic's top talents, who speak out about their latest ventures!"[125]

Also on the corporate produced side of things, coffee table publications, such as the *Batman* film tie-in *Tales of the Dark Knight: Batman's First Fifty Years: 1939-1989* or *Superman: The Ultimate Guide* are a wealth of information for anyone with an interest in comic book characters, be they expert fans or curious newcomers. *Superman: The Ultimate Guide*, for instance informs readers on its first page that "for *Superman: The Ultimate Guide,* DK has been permitted unparalleled access to the archives of DC comics, shapers of the Superman legend. Spectacular, specially commissioned artworks reveal key locations, such as the Planet Krypton, as they have never been shown before. The secret workings of installations such as Superman's Fortress of Solitude are also

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[124] See Wein, Len and various, *Who's Who: The Definitive Directory to the DC Universe* # 7 (September 1985) for instance.

displayed, often for the first time. Crucial events and characters are exclusively illustrated with drawings from the original comic books. The result is a unique, in-depth, and up-to-the-minute approach to Superman's career that will delight fans of all ages."[126] The book is divided into a series of sections that cover various aspects of Superman's mythos, for the most part focusing on the comic book's continuity since his 1986 revision. The book's 128 pages cover such topics as Superman's origin, important Metropolis locales, descriptions and histories of his allies, supporting cast and notable villains. Also included is a chronology of developments within the various Superman comic books that include events that occurred before the character's mid-80's reworking.

This text is intended as a source of information on the character for individuals ranging in genre competence from the unfamiliar novice to the devoted expert. This is certainly evident from the range of reviews for the book posted on Amazon.com. The site features reviews of *Superman: The Ultimate Guide* from publications such as *Booklist*, that recommends it for grades 6-12, *School Library Journal,* who give it a similar recommendation, and *Publisher's Weekly*, all of which see it primarily as a Superman primer for the young that can be enjoyed by fans of all ages.

Perhaps more interesting was a reader review posted on the site by one Mitch Weaver of Houston, Texas. He wrote that:

> I have been a lifelong fan of Superman. However, I never had the
> time or money that would allow me to get into the comic book aspect of
> the franchise. Curiosity finally got the better of me, and I set out to learn
> more based on how Superman has been perceived through comics. When I

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[125] "DC in Demand" July, 2004, as printed in *Identity Crisis* #2.
[126] Beatty, Scott, *Superman: The Ultimate Guide*, (New York: DK publishing, 2002), Front cover flap.

received this book, I was blown away at how great it was. Through

beautiful illustrations and a detailed account of comic book history, I was

able to learn everything I never knew about the Man of Steel. Every aspect

of the character is shown in this book, and then some. I loved the way that

the book went through Superman's history in chronological order. This

made it very easy to learn about Superman's history. I especially enjoyed

the detailed section of all the super villains that Superman has

encountered. That was one area that I was seriously lacking in. Of course I

had heard the names before - Doomsday, Brainiac, Metallo, etc. However,

I never knew about their abilities, or what happened when they faced off

with Superman. Every major villain is described in detail, which gives you

a full understanding of each one. Now maybe I think more of this book

than others, because I am a comic book novice. However, this book was

very satisfying to me, and I recommend it to anyone who has always liked

Superman, but still has a lot to learn.[127]

Clearly, if this book was intended to familiarize novice readers, and in this case a

self-described novice at that, with the character it succeeded, at least this instance.

Nevertheless, and reflecting the dislike some readers have for *Superman's* current

comic book continuity, another reviewer wrote that:

> This is pretty much a commercial for the current "Dark Age." It
>
> focuses mostly on the weaker Superman as featured in the "Justice
>
> League" and other recent tales. It skips over much of the classic

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[127] Weaver, Mitch, "A must for any Superman fan...,"Online Review, posted on 18 February, 2004, at *Amazon.com,* at <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0789488531/104-9012833-

appearances of Superman over the years in favor of a more so-called

"cutting edge" style mostly ignoring the best writers and artists such as

Boring, Anderson and Swan. No coverage of classic portrayals such as the

radio and movie serials, the live action TV shows and movies. A very

sparse account. Since there will be a better version when the new film

comes out there is really no reason to buy this. Wait for the new and better

book to be published.[128]

Essentially, this reviewer seems to take issue with the book's focus on the

contemporary, official, history of Superman since his makeover by John Byrne. He is

also clearly an expert reader, and unashamedly so judging from the Silver Age creators

whose names he drops, who seems to have desired far more extensive coverage of the

character's sixty plus years of history. Interestingly, while somewhat contemptuous of the

book's aim to inform readers of the in's and out's of the current Superman mythos,

evident from his use of the word commercial, the reviewer, although likely an expert

reader, is clearly looking for a more exhaustive reference book. This further illustrates the

importance of knowledge about the genre, its characters and its creators to its readers,

regardless of their level of competence. And perhaps, it even shows the discomfort some

fans have with use of techniques like referencing and retelling to establish certain stories

and versions of characters as the definitive versions.

In conclusion, I hope this chapter has made several points. The first is that a

certain degree of familiarity with generic/formal and, especially, narrative/expository

3115909?v=glance>. I did do a few minor spelling corrections.

[128]Russell, Rubert, "The not so Ultimate Guide," Online Review, posted on 2 August, 2003, at *Amazon.com* at <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/0789488531/ref=cm_cr_dp_2_1/103-4138713-7243047?%5Fencoding=UTF8&me=ATVPDKIKX0DER&s=books>.

knowledge is very important to being a competent reader of superhero comic books. This is especially the case because many superhero texts assume, if not require, that their readers command this knowledge. The second is that certain genre conventions, likely shaped by industry interests, seem to facilitate the acquisition of this knowledge by novice readers. Indeed, without such techniques it would seem unlikely that comic book publishers could get long-term profits from even their most iconic character properties. Referencing and retelling are, amongst others important techniques, utilised in the genre to this end. The final point is that these techniques not only serve this pedagogical function, but ironically are key processes in the establishment of the very history novices are required to learn.

Chapter Four

Tarnishing the Silver Age:

The Collective Memory of Comic Books

"The impression of the old-fashioned can arise only where, in a certain way, reference is made to the most topical."[129]

Benjamin, Walter, **The Arcades Project**, Convolute B3

"The year is 1974. It is a time of political uncertainty and social unrest. The Vietnam War has split the nation. A president stands accused of conspiracy, and will wind up resigning. And the Silver Agent is dead."[130]

Busiek, Anderson, Ross, Sinclair and Comicraft, "Justice Systems," **Astro City: Local Heroes** #5, inside cover.

The previous chapters of this thesis have examined two seemingly conflicting tendencies within American superhero comics. The first is that the main product of comic book publishers is not comic books per se, but rather the trademarked character properties that are featured within them. The more successful of these characters can, in turn, be licensed out to appear on a variety of merchandise or featured in television programs and films that attempt to translate their recognizability into audiences. As my first chapter argued many of these character properties have undergone substantial changes since they were first created in order to continue to appeal to changing publics. These changes—ranging from minor costume alterations, to stories with more 'relevant' themes, to the full

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[129] Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project*, Eiland and McLaughlin trans, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999) convolute B3, 6 p. 69
[130] Busiek, Anderson, Ross, Sinclair and Comicraft, "Justice Systems," *Astro City: Local Heroes* #5 (Homage, February 2004), inside cover.

rewriting of a character's identity and history—are often explicitly done to prevent these superhero characters from becoming hopelessly outdated and therefore unattractive to changing tastes.

However, it can also be argued that within comic book culture, and possibly modern popular culture itself, nothing ever really goes away. As Chapters Two and Three attempted to show, knowledge of comic book history—both in terms of diagetic events that comprise a publisher's comic book continuity and the non-diagetic developments within the industry, amongst its creators, and its reception—is a central aspect of being a comic book reader or fan. Chapter Two traced out the development of the reprint as a product at DC Comics. It ultimately argued that the recent batch of luxury reprints marketed to fans on the basis of their material quality and the access to comic book history they provide are indicative of the important role such knowledge plays in comic book fandom. Chapter Three focused upon the knowledge of the superhero genre, especially the diagetic histories of the fictional universes of various publishers, that is necessary to follow contemporary superhero narratives. Particular attention was paid to the resources that are offered to newer, inexperienced, readers.

This chapter will look at how these two tendencies within comic culture have intersected. This intersection has created—through both an awareness of how superhero comics have changed to keep with the times and a stubborn refusal to forget those elements that have been left behind as 'old-fashioned'—a space where elements of comic books past are easily used to evoke a broader sense of history. For the most part, as

pointed out by Matthew J. Pustz in *Comic Book Culture*, these older elements generally surface in the form of allusions to past creators, stories and characters.[131]

As Pustz observes

since at least the 1970's, mainstream comic books have been filled with allusions and sly references to the work of famous creators, classic comics, and a variety of prominent and obscure characters...Allusions can allow writers to tap into established continuity or to use classic archetypes while still creating original stories; allusions can allow artists to create a sense of tradition by imitating or echoing industry giants. For readers who recognize these allusions, comic books become filled with a greater importance, a larger web of significances, a longer tradition, a more developed history.[132]

Although many of these allusions are used to create what Pustz labels 'fannish' stories that are essentially reflexive for the sake of reflexivity, many of these allusions manage to exceed simply being homages or parodies of famous creators, characters and stories. Rather, they often evoke a sense of period that goes beyond the narrow confines of comic book history or continuity. These texts not only put forward an interpretation of the old comic book elements deployed but of the historical context in which they originated. Nor is this sense of historical context in any way, shape or form, particularly narrow. Indeed, these allusions to comic books past often form a confluence of related, but distinct, memories and histories including the history of the comic book industry, the superhero genre, the memories of fans and the more general historical context in which

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[131] Pustz, Matthew J., *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999) p. 143.

the alluded-to element of comicdom was created. Thus, allusions to moments, characters and emblems of earlier periods in the superhero genre have been employed to stand in for, and sometimes comment upon, the historical moment they have become associated with. Such allusions have a synecdochical quality wherein a stock image of the Silver Age of comics is employed to refer to a whole set of ideas about the history of the superhero genre, the comic book industry, and life within American society in the late 1950's and early to mid 1960's.

That allusions to the Silver Age are often used to evoke and draw upon such a broad range of historical and mnemonic discourses seems to me to only be possible in a situation like that outlined by my first three chapters. Namely that despite the industry mandated changes to the genre and its characters, old material and stories have continued to have an important presence in comic book culture; either physically, in the form of reprints, or as specialized knowledges that are a crucial aspect to fandom. In short, creators who deploy such allusions can expect a large portion of their audience to understand these allusions. Further, the evocation of these different historical discourses and the manner in which these allusions tend to blur the distinctions between them has led me to question whether they can be seen as trying to capture something akin to the notion of 'structure of feeling' as put forward by Raymond Williams. Thus, I will be looking at how uses of comic book history, (and I would argue the same of many forms of popular culture), can relate to a more general sense of popular history and collective memory.

The ideas about the relationship between popular culture and history that I plan to work with originate from theorists who can, for the most part, be considered theorists of

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[132] Ibid.

collective memory. There is, however, a great deal of work on and theories of collective memory; ranging from seminal works like Maurice Halbwachs' *On Collective Memory* to more recent, but nevertheless influential, theoretical ideas such as Cathy Caruth's analysis of collective memory and history as trauma, Pierre Nora's *Lieux de Mémoire* or Fredric Jameson's notion of collective amnesia as a defining feature of post-modernity. With such a wide field to choose from, I have had to be fairly selective in assembling an appropriate body of theorists to draw upon for this chapter or risk being overwhelmed by the dizzying array of theoretical positions this area of study has to offer.

As a result, I have tried to focus on those writers and theorists who have directly addressed the role of popular culture or mass media texts in their theoretical work on collective memory. Further, I have chosen to draw upon theorists who are not overtly hostile to mass media texts or popular culture as an enemy of memory or history, but who either see productive elements in this relationship or are at least willing to deal with the saturation of media in our culture rather than merely rail against it. George Lipsitz' book *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* can in many ways be seen as a pioneering work in this light.

Rather than totally condemning the mass media or popular culture as distractions from or an impediment to remembering the past, Lipsitz argues that "For some populations at some times, commercialized leisure is history- a repository of collective memory that places immediate experience in the context of change over time. The very same media that trivialize and distort culture, that turn art into commodities, and that obscure the origins and intentions of artists also provide meaningful connection to our

own pasts and to the pasts of others."[133] In this work on the relationship between popular

culture and collective memory, Lipsitz explores a range of topics and approaches,

including a semiotic analysis of Mardi Gras Indians and an essay that situates 'B'

directors Sam Fuller and Edgar Ulmer within the historical moments they worked in.[134]

Although the book is rather thin on the topic of fictional narratives that are set in or

openly comment on the past, Lipsitz' chapter on popular novels, myth, and counter

memory does provide a useful insight into the status of works similar to the superhero

narratives I cited above. Lipsitz argues that

> As public texts touching audiences with historical memories,
>
> popular novels have some responsibility for historical accuracy in order to
>
> be perceived as credible. At the very least, they cannot disregard collective
>
> historical memory. On the other hand, as works of art and imagination,
>
> they are not bound by the constraints of public records and verifiable
>
> evidence as would be the case for historical scholarship. They belong to a
>
> realm between myth and history, and they present a world view that
>
> mediates between the two. It is literature that brings out the hidden
>
> resources of collective historical memory.[135]

Articulating a similar sentiment regarding popular texts, both fictional and non-

fictional, is Gary R. Edgerton in his introductory chapter to *Television Histories: Shaping*

Collective Memory in the Media Age. This introduction explored "some of the parameters

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[133] Lipsitz, George, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 5
[134] See Lipsitz Chp. 8 and Chp. 10.
[135] Ibid, p. 229-30.

and implications of 'television as historian.[136]'" A crucial distinction that Edgerton

makes, and I would like to take up, is between popular and professional history. By

popular history, Edgerton is referring to historical narratives that are constructed for

general consumption by laypersons. These narratives are not bound by formal qualities

and can range from general books on the American Civil War, to historical novels, to

documentaries, to television dramas with historical settings. Professional history, on the

other hand, can be thought of as historical work that is seen as legitimate within the

scholarly discipline of history and is usually generated from within the academy.

Following historian Warren Susman, Edgerton argues that "rather than think[ing] of

professional and popular history as diametrically opposed traditions (i.e., one more

reliable and true; the other unsophisticated and false), it is more helpful, instead, to

consider them as two ends of the same continuum… One supplies the drama; the other,

the understanding. The popular heritage holds the potential to connect people

passionately to their pasts; the scholarly camp maps out the processes for comprehending

what actually happened with richness and depth."[137] Essentially, Edgerton is arguing that

rather than automatically condemn a work of popular history for lacking the complexity

precision, and accuracy of historical work created within the academy, it may be more

useful to look at how popular histories engage with and shape people's perception of the

past. This is a particularly useful turn if one is willing to acknowledge popular histories,

as histories rather than treating them as mere entertainments that inevitably distract the

public from 'real' historical understanding.

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[136] Edgerton, Gary R, "Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether," in *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins eds, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001), p. 1.
[137] Edgerton, p. 6.

Equally important, Edgerton argues that *"collective memory is the site of mediation where professional history must ultimately share space with popular history."*[138] For Edgerton, collective memory is *"the full sweep of historical consciousness, understanding, and expression that a culture has to offer."*[139] Popular history then is as important, if not more so, than professional history to Edgerton since he constitutes collective memory as the sum total of historical resources and perspectives that a culture has to offer. Further, since Edgerton believes that the historical consciousness of the vast majority of people is informed by popular historical narratives, the vision of history put forward by such popular narratives is likely far more influential than the more erudite arguments put forward by professional historians. While I find Edgerton's definition of collective memory a little too expansive—don't members of a local subculture have a collective memory that is distinct from the general culture? Is it even useful to think of the 'collective' in collective memory as representing something as large as a culture?—the emphasis he puts on the shared textual resources is important since it situates collective memory in shared texts rather than privileging the memories of individual people. This point is important when considering the relationship between popular culture, history and memory.

A more nuanced version of this position is put forward by James V. Wertsch in his book *Voices of Collective Remembering*. Indeed one of the foundations of this book is Wertsch's idea of collective memory as a mediated action that relies on certain cultural tools, such as narrative or print media, to function. He states that "in analyzing collective memory from this perspective, I pay particular attention to the role of narrative texts as

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[138] Edgerton, p. 5. Emphasis in original.
[139] Ibid.

cultural tools. The functional dualism of these tools means that memory can be used to provide accurate accounts of the past as well as accounts that are 'usable' in the present for various political and cultural purposes."[140] This position allows one to examine contemporary collective memory, which is highly mediated, without necessarily setting it up in a remorseful contrast with earlier, 'purer,' forms of collective memory that are generally seen as being natural and unmediated. It also allows one to take a position open to both focusing on the accuracy or inaccuracy of collective memory and the extent to which collective memory discourse is oriented towards the constitution of pasts usable in the present.

A final theorist who works along these lines that I should mention is Iwona Irwin-Zarecka. In her book *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory*, Irwin-Zarecka claims that "we all make sense of the past with the help of a whole variety of resources, that this making sense is motivated by our personal experience but facilitated (or impeded) by public offerings, and that such public offerings are a mixture of presences and absences."[141] Therefore, she argues that "'A collective memory'—as a set of ideas, images, feelings about the past—is best located not in the minds of individuals, but in the resources they share."[142]

It is Irwin-Zarecka's emphasis on the affective element of collective memory that is crucial to my understanding of the concept. The idea that collective memory is as much a set of broad impressions about the past as an inventory of accurate or inaccurate accounts of events that are important to one group or another opens up a space to

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[140] Wertsch, James V., *Voices of Collective Remembering*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 66.
[141] Irwin-Zarecka, Iwona, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1994), p. 4.

understand how our memories and impressions of pop culture past participate in a more general discourse of the past. This is particularly useful when one considers popular texts that would not be considered serious historical works but that nevertheless provide their audiences with a sense of period that is as much a result of their references to other popular texts as any scrupulous research on the details of a past era. I am thinking of television programs like *That 70's Show* and films such as the Austin Powers series and *Pleasantville*. Through their play with intertextual references to past pop texts, such films and television programs often create a sense of how a period 'felt' that arguably informs their audiences' understanding of a period as much as more traditional historical narratives, particularly if they were too young to have experienced it firsthand.

To better capture what I'm getting at, I would like to utilize a variation on Raymond Williams' notion of structure of feeling. Attempting to find a term capable of expressing a sense of the lived experience of individuals in different historical moments that does not reduce such experiences to direct manifestations of ideology or worldview, Williams developed the notion of structure of feeling in the 1950's. Arguing that examining any one aspect of a culture in isolation and deducing from it the whole of a society is both reductive and fails to do justice to the actual lived experience of the individuals who within the studied culture, Williams put forward, in *The Long Revolution*, structure of feeling as a concept and, to a certain extent, a methodology.[143]

Williams defines the term in that work by stating that "it is as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense, this structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular

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[142] Ibid.
[143] Williams, Raymond, *The Long Revolution*, (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1961), p. 42-7.

living result of all the elements in the general organization."[144] Although the term

mutated greatly over the years, I will be drawing on some aspects of structure of feeling

as it appeared in *The Long Revolution* and as it was later refined in *Marxism and

Literature*. For the most part, a structure of feeling can be understood, in terms of this

thesis, as an articulation of the lived experience of existing within a specific social

formation.

These articulations express not only the constrictions and possibilities of formal

and legitimated belief systems, but the subjective and affective experience of day to day

life with all of its contradictions and inconsistencies. Shifts in and between structures of

feeling are not merely reflections of changes within a culture's major institutions and

traditions—although they participate in these changes as well—but are also articulations,

and often causes, of changes in the minutiae of material culture: art, fashion, architecture,

literature and design. Taken together these changes, big and small, are expressions of

temporarily stable cultural formations and are important elements interacting with an ever

fluid and changing social context. Nor are such structures of feeling overriding or

totalizing as multiple and seemingly contradictory structures can exist side by side

reflecting the different experiences of different social formations.

Any attempt to map out such a structure needs, at least according to Williams

circa *The Long Revolution,* to take into account an incredibly wide range of influences.

This is evident in his sample analysis of 1840's England that employs data on

developments in technology, and print technology in particular, the crucial political and

economic developments of the age, a very wide sampling of the literature of the era and,

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[144] Ibid, p. 48.

finally, a discussion of the social character of the period.[145] Taken together, Williams

sketches out both a preliminary discussion of the era's structure of feeling and a more

general analysis of the period's culture.

Despite his insistence on structure of feeling being the production of a huge range

of socio-cultural factors, Williams gives pride of place to art and literature in both *The*

Long Revolution and *Marxism and Literature* in terms of tracing out such structures after

the fact. For Williams, the best and possibly only tangible evidence of structures of

feeling, and of the transition between the structures of one moment and emergence of

new structures, is to be found in the traces left in material culture. Indeed, it is ultimately

a study of the ephemeral, a point that Williams makes using the example of changes in

language. He states that "no generation speaks quite the same language as its

predecessors."[146] He argues that these changes

> can be defined in terms of additions, deletions, and modifications,
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> but these do not exhaust it. What really changes is something quite
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> general, over a wide range, and the description that often fits the change
>
> best is the literary term 'style.' It is a general change, rather than a set of
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> deliberate choices, yet choices can be deduced from it, as well as effects.
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> Similar kinds of change can be observed in manners, dress, building, and
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> other similar forms of social life. It is an open question—that is to say, a
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> set of specific historical questions—whether in any of these changes this
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> or that group has been dominant or influential, or whether they are the
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> result of much more general interaction. For what we are defining is a

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[145] Ibid, p. 54-71.
[146] Williams, Raymond, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 131.

particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct

from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or

period.[147]

Art—and I am taking that to include texts belonging to high and low culture and

across a wide range of media and forms—is not only an important form of evidence for

such qualities but, Williams argues, its analysis could greatly benefit from taking such

factors into account. This is because "the true social content is in a significant number of

cases of this present and affective kind, which cannot without loss be reduced to belief

systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships, though it may include all these as

lived and experienced, with or without tension."[148]

All this being said, my interpretation and use of Williams needs to be qualified.

To begin with, I am being selective about which elements of Williams' work I am

choosing. Within *Marxism and Literature*, for example, structure of feeling is yoked to

his project of identifying emergent, oppositional, social formations and seems to want to

reserve the term for the analysis of art generated by such formations.[149] Further, although

he acknowledged that it was even more difficult, he seems to have intended, in this later

period, to use structure of feeling to describe the present and near future as much as the

past. These turns effectively restricted the kinds of art that can articulate a structure of

feeling and, somewhat arbitrarily, the historical moments and situations the term can be

usefully applied to.

When defined in the earlier *The Long Revolution*, on the other hand, structure of

feeling seems more of a category of cultural analysis that can be most usefully applied to

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[147] *Marxism and Literature* p. 131. He makes a very, very, similar statement in *The Long Revolution* p. 48.
[148] Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 133.

the past. In fact, Williams argues that, "if we reflect on the nature of a structure of feeling, and see how it can fail to be fully understood even by living people in close contact with it, with ample material at their disposal, including the contemporary arts, we shall not suppose that we can ever do more than make an approach, an approximation, using any channels."[150] Indeed, although Williams argues that one can construct an approximation of an era's structure of feeling—by drawing upon both an analysis of the political, economic, and social developments of a period along with a nuanced reading of an aggregate of the same period's art—he remains acutely aware that such constructions will always be just that: approximations of the lived experience of an era created to further the understanding of that era.

Although reconstructions of the intangible structures of lived experience arrived at through painstaking and wide-ranging historical research may be comparatively rare, there exist a number of media texts that combine references to older popular culture materials with a broader set of historical understandings to construct what can be labeled a limited expression of a 'structure of feeling.' As such, whether or not structures of feeling, as articulated in works of art or literature, objectively exist or accurately express the lived experience of an individual living in a particular moment and social formation is ultimately beside the point. Accurate or not, texts that fashion an arguably influential sense of the past through referencing the material minutia of past historical moments, including past pop culture texts contribute to the historical understanding of a broad audience of laypersons. These reflexive texts do not provide a precise argument of what happened when or why, but put forward of an impression of how things were, felt or were

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[149] Ibid, p. 133-4.
[150] Williams, *Long Revolution*, p. 49.

at least represented by the popular media of the day that is often combined with ideas about the social, political, and, in some cases, economic structures of the era in which the referred to texts were produced.

One can think of, for example, how the aesthetics of the 1950's suburban sitcom, and *Leave it to Beaver* in particular, have consistently been deployed by later, reflexive, works to stand in for a bundle of ideas, impressions, ideological contradictions, and feelings associated with that era of American history. Thus, the aesthetics of sitcoms like *Leave it to Beaver* or *The Donna Reed Show* are consistently employed by later reflexive texts to denote, for example, an idyllic vision of postwar consensus, the suburbanization of America, or the constricting gender roles of the nuclear family as central aspects of American life in the 1950's. Even those texts that explicitly set out to undermine the accuracy of the structure of feeling that could be read from reruns of 50's sitcoms, such as *Parents* or *Pleasantville*, ultimately frame their commentaries on 1950's society in terms of the impression put forward by *Leave it to Beaver*-like sitcoms and the inadequacies or out and out falsehood of such an impression.[151]

Reflexive texts that put forward a limited representation of a past period's structure of feeling are interesting to consider in relation to collective memory for several reasons. One is that they provide a textual resource about the past that can be accessed by a broad range of people. Indeed, the fact that they are grounded in popular culture likely increases the chances that lay people will engage with such texts. Another is that although such texts may be short on concrete historical facts, they may help shape the

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[151] This line of thinking was influenced by a keynote address, entitled 'Embedded Memories,' given by Will Straw at the 2004 Revolutions Conference.

broad sets of impressions, feelings and ideas about the past that are an important aspect of collective memory.

It would seem then that popular culture texts are often seen as a useful site to ground articulations of a structure of feeling that existed at the moment of their creation. Or they are, at least, used as such by later texts that attempt to create a broad sense of the lived experience of the past by deploying references to past media texts, forms and artifacts. However, it must be stressed that the development and mutations of popular cultural forms and more general shifts within a society cannot be casually linked in any simple direct correspondence. Rather, in the case of American superhero comics at least, formal changes occur for a number of reasons of which responses to social change are only one. Indeed, in American comic culture there exists an elaborate periodization of comic book history into different 'ages' that cannot be entirely reduced to changes outside of industry and genre.

Nevertheless, as I will argue shortly, these successive 'ages' of American comic books have retroactively taken on a historical significance whereby the formal qualities that demarcate them from other periods are now often used to signify the values, ideologies, contradictions and experiences of the cultural milieu that produced them. This sense of period that is associated with each of these successive ages has become fairly regularized and consistent. Thus, allusions to the Golden Age nearly always make reference to life in the depression and the experience of World War Two as crucial structuring elements of the era and the comics it produced; while references to the complex relationship the American public had towards all things atomic play and the cold war prominently in most allusions to the Silver Age. In this sense it seems appropriate to

refer to the bundle of values, ideologies, contradictions and experiences that have become associated with a particular 'age' of comic books as a structure of feeling.

An important aspect of this association between an era of comics and its historical context is that such linkages are often observed and made conventional retroactively. Thus, it seems likely that the way comic book narratives from a certain period articulate, and can come to stand in for, a structure of feeling from that period is either more easily perceived with hindsight, a construction fashioned by later creators and critics, or both. Regardless of exactly how and why these qualities take on such significance, I hope I can show that they are an intriguing overlapping element between our memories of cultural forms and a more broad sense of collective memory.

In order to fully understand how this works within American superhero comics it is important to keep in mind Chapter One's examination of how the industry, the genre, and its creators have responded to the perceived need to keep superhero characters fundamentally the same while dealing with changing circumstances. Indeed, the successive 'ages' referred to above almost exclusively refer to developments within the superhero genre. They are essentially used to mark off broad changes in the industry that were, at least partially, responses to a changing marketplace. However, it is important to remember that through reprints, references and retellings many of the characters, stories and formal techniques of a given period of comic book publication continue to maintain a presence within the comic books and comic book culture of later years.

The main comic book eras are, according to the "Know The Buzz Words" section of the twenty-fifth edition of *The Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*, the Golden Age (1938-1945), the Silver Age (1956-1969), the Bronze Age (1970-1980), and the Modern

Age (1980-Present).[152] It should be noted that the Overstreet definitions of the ages of comics are amongst the most precise and dry that circulate within comic culture. In general use, the limits of most of these periods can be stretched and are not considered absolute. Although at first glance these periods seem to describe all comics published between fairly arbitrary dates—and on one level that is exactly what they signify—each age has also come to stand for, and be represented by, a range of stylistic and thematic tendencies.

Importantly, each of these ages is marked by certain historical developments, both within and outside the industry, including changes in style and tone. References to these ages circulate fairly widely within comic culture, reinforcing their status as broad markers of change within comics. These references range from the division of chapters in books on comic book history, to advertisements for reprint books, to characters that are meant to symbolize a certain age of comics.[153] More importantly, each of these periods of comic book publication have taken on meanings beyond the aesthetic differences between those ages preceding and succeeding them.

Partially, this is because when comics become grouped together as being part of an 'age' at least two operations seem to be at work. The first and most obvious is that the texts and characters classified as part of a certain age become fixed to a historical context and are thus taken to belong to and be representative of that era. An example of this can be found in the superhero revival of the 1950's. This revival is now commonly referred to

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[152] Ibid, p. A-18-A-19.

[153] See Goulart, Ron, *Over 50 Years of American Comic Books*, (Lincolnwood: Publications International, 1991) for a book on comic book history that largely breaks down along these lines, the recent *DC Archive* promotional samplers were divided according to the 'age' its reprints belonged to, and references to the Silver Agent in Kurt Busiek's *Astro City* for a character that is meant to symbolize an era of comic bookdom.

by comic culture as the beginning of the Silver Age. However, it was also the birth of the

Golden Age as a concept and a classification.[154]

As mentioned above, the superhero revival that marks the beginning of the Silver

Age is generally thought to begin with the reintroduction of The Flash in *Showcase #4*

(September-October, 1956). This reintroduction was significant because it not only

signaled a return of many of the characters and titles that had ceased publication after the

superhero boom of the late 1930's and 1940's went bust, but was simultaneously a break

with this past. Emblematic of this simultaneous return to and break from the past is the

creation of the Silver Age Flash. Rather than simply revive the Golden Age version of the

Flash that had been published in the 1940's, the editorial staff at DC chose to update the

character giving him a new secret origin, costume, and identity. Effectively they created a

rebooted version of 'The Flash' who, at first glance, was only superficially related to the

previous character by name and their mutual super-speed powers.

However, rather than just ignoring the 1940's incarnation of the character, it was

revealed in the course of the Silver Age Flash's first story that he had been inspired to

become The Flash by his love of the old comic book adventures of the 1940's version of

the character. In other words, there was a direct, diagetic, reference to the new version of

the Flash being inspired by his fictional predecessor.[155] This sense of memory was further

built upon in these early adventures when, in September 1961, the comic book miracle of

travel between parallel universes allowed the Silver Age Flash to meet his inspirational

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[154] Indeed, in Ken Quattro's article "The New Ages: Rethinking Comic Book History," posted at www.comicartville.com, the first use of the term 'Golden Age' referring to the superhero boom of the 1930's and 40's is dated to 1960 and he seems to believe that the term 'Silver Age' came into use around the same time.

[155] Indeed, when the Silver Age Flash was finally given a solo title it actually continued the numbering of the Golden Age *Flash Comics*.

Golden Age counterpart in a story that would later enable nearly all of the new versions of DC's characters to encounter their historical counterparts. Indeed, a complex architecture of parallel universes, referred to as the DC multiverse, was created during this period precisely for the purpose of making sense of the published histories of the company's characters.

The important point to stress is that with the creation of the Silver Age Flash—police scientist Barry Allen—the Golden Age Flash—chemistry student Jay Garrick—became immutably fixed as belonging to the past. The Jay Garrick Flash, along with his Golden Age contemporaries, were fixed as emblems of the 1930's and 1940's. This in turn explicitly linked the published books and characters of the Golden Age to the historical context of the late depression and World War II era. Effectively this made it easier for future creators and critics to draw out or, arguably create, interconnections between these characters and narratives and their socio-cultural context.

The second thing that occurs as a result of the classification of certain texts and characters, or at least versions of characters, as belonging to different ages is that a general impression of the visual style, layout, dialogue, and themes of each age has emerged. These often take the form of pastiches comprised of aesthetic elements,—such as artistic styles, page layout, and conventions of dialog—characters, and narrative conventions that are used to exemplify the perceived essence of a past age of comic books. Indeed, it is likely that these actions effectively construct a set of visual and verbal impressions that are taken to constitute the essence of the genre's of past moments as much as they tap into a pre-existing essence of any kind.

These impressions are often used in nostalgic homages or parodies of comic books from the age they refer to. In other cases however, the aesthetic elements that have come to stand in for the 'essence' of an age of comics are deployed as an important element in a newer texts' commentary about the relationship between the content and style of comic books from past eras and the milieu that produced them. The remainder of this chapter will look at what one such age, the Silver Age, has come to be identified with and how the texts and aesthetics associated with the Silver Age have been employed in the creation of narratives that use such them to explore the historical context of the era.

One of the best ways to start such a discussion is to look at those stories and criticism that contrast the Silver Age with its successor, the Bronze Age, and, in the process, try to position the comics of each era as a product of their context. As noted above, the Silver Age is generally considered to have lasted from the mid-1950's until the late 1960's or early 1970's. Although its beginning with the revival of the Flash in 1956 is rarely disputed, the end of the era remains a subject for debate. Partially this is because, unlike the transition between the Golden and Silver Ages, there was not a slew of canceled or revived titles that lend themselves to demarcating the boundary between the Silver and Bronze Ages.

Instead, the Silver Age has several different endings, and reasons for ending, that are currently circulating amongst comic book fans and historians with equal legitimacy. For some, the relatively arbitrary end of the 1960's signals the end of the era. For others, changes behind the scenes, but still within the industry—like the price increase to 12 cents from 10 or the defection of artist Jack Kirby from Marvel to DC—mark the

transition to the Bronze Age.[156] Slightly more useful, from my perspective, are those who

consider the difference between the Silver and Bronze Ages primarily one of tone.

For instance, the chapter of Ron Goulart's *Over 50 Years of American Comic*

Books that focuses on the Bronze Age of comics is entitled "'It's Good, But is it

Relevant?'" Goulart explains that "neither fantasy nor horror were the big stories of

comic books in the seventies. The new byword—and source of some of the industry's

most significant successes—was *relevance*. Comic books suddenly wanted to grow up

and reflect the real world."[157] The example he cites as emblematic of the beginning of

this turn towards gritty realism is Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams' run on *Green*

Lantern/Green Arrow, a title noted as one of the first to use the superhero genre as a

platform to discuss, usually with heavy-handed moralizing, social ills like poverty, racism

and drug addiction.[158]

This move towards realism is often seen to be clearly encapsulated by Neal

Adams' highly praised art. Indeed, an issue of *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight*

featuring citizens of Gotham City swapping tales and interpretations of the Batman from

different periods of the character's history had Neal Adams parodying his own style to

capture the preachy, socially conscious, tone of Batman stories from the late 1960's and

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[156] Quattro, Ken "The New Ages: Rethinking Comic Book History," posted at www.comicartville.com. I should point out that he uses both of these examples to, ultimately, undermine the idea that anything as drastic as an era ended during this time. As is suggested by the title of his article, Quattro feels that it would be useful to ditch much of the current terminology used in comic book history in order to make a space for the history of non-superhero comics. Although I agree that the current terms are less useful when considering other genres, the continuing dominance of the Ages of comics and my focus on the superhero genre has led me to continue using them.

[157] Goulart, p. 277-8, italics in original.

[158] Ibid. Most famously, this run included a now famous story where Green Arrow's old sidekick is revealed to have become a junkie

early 1970's.[159] Similarly, other comic book historians trace the birth of the Bronze Age

to the death of Gwen Stacey, Peter Parker's first long-term girlfriend.[160] In particular,

scholar Arnold Blumberg argues that the birth of the Bronze Age can be definitively

located in the fateful June, 1973, issue of *Amazing Spider-Man* in which Stacey died and

the subsequently darker tone of Marvel's output.[161]

Regardless of exactly when, why, or even if the Bronze Age began, the perceived

shift in tone that accompanied, and according to some defines, it has become a stock

element of comic book history. This change in tone is now often casually linked to

changes within American society during this period. For example, Blumberg writes:

Emerging from an era of prosperity and hope into one of

uncertainty and violence, America was growing up. Television brought the

violence of the Vietnam War and its homefront ramifications into the lives

of every family in the nation. The approaching dissolution of the

Presidency and the sordid details of the Watergate conspiracy shattered

American illusions about the incorruptibility of its own leaders. In short,

the people of the United States were learning some hard truths, and if art is

indeed merely a reflection of life, then the world of superhero comics--

perhaps the purest iconic distillation of reality raised to mythic levels--was

destined to encounter those truths as well.

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[159] see the "Age is Unhealthy to Children and Other Living Things," by Michael Gilbert and Neal Adams, portion of Michael Gilbert's "Stories" in *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight #94*, (May, 1997).
[160] For those unfamiliar with Marvel Comics or the recent series of films, Peter Parker is the secret identity of the amazing Spiderman.
[161] Blumberg, Arnold T., "'The Night Gwen Stacy Died:' The End of Innocence and the Birth of the Bronze Age" in the electronic journal *Reconstruction*, Fall 2003 (Volume 3, Number 4). The journal can be found at http://www.reconstruction.ws/. As pointed out by Blumberg, the fourth issue of Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross' *Marvels*, a four issue mini-series that retells the first four decades of the history of Marvel's fictional

However, this causation is not only used by scholars like Blumberg, but by comic book creators who allude to the characters, stories, and aesthetics of the Bronze Age. These allusions help fashion stories that posit a relationship between past moments of the superhero genre and the context in which they happened. Indeed, by positing a relationship between the content of Bronze Age comics and a wide range of extra-textual socio-historical developments, such stories construct something akin to a structure of feeling that informs the readers of both the history of comic books, the superhero genre, and the past cultural milieu that produced them.

An example of this can be found in issue five of *Astro City: Local Heroes* by Kurt Busiek, Brent E. Anderson and Alex Ross, from which one of the two opening quotes of this chapter was taken. The recap of the previous issue's story begins by framing the two issue story arc within both comic book and American history. It reads "The year is 1974. It is a time of political uncertainty and social unrest. The Vietnam War has split the nation. A president stands accused of conspiracy, and will wind up resigning. And the Silver Agent is dead."[162] This contextualization of the story arc is, if a little less detailed, eerily similar to Blumberg's.

The story itself is almost a pictorial article on comic book history that argues that the Bronze Age began in response to a series of shifts in the societal, cultural and political climate of America in the early 1970's. The two part story explicitly ties the emergence of grim, murderous, vigilante heroes like Marvel's The Punisher—who was himself a Dirty Harry knock off—with the perceived loss of faith in American social and

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universe from the perspective of a, largely, ordinary citizen, retells the death of Gwen Stacey in such a way to place it as the crucial break between the Bronze and Silver Age of Marvel comics.
[162] Busiek, Anderson, Ross, Sinclair and Comicraft, "Justice Systems," *Astro City: Local Heroes #5* (Homage, February 2004), inside cover.

political institutions during that time. It also makes the break between the Silver and Bronze Ages more distinct and dramatic with the line "and the Silver Agent is dead."

The Silver Agent, a kind of '60's Captain America/Batman analogue in the fictional universe of *Astro City*, is generally used by the series' writer, Kurt Busiek, as an emblem for the Silver Age of superhero comics. The Blue Knight, on the other hand, *Astro City*'s Punisher/Dirty Harry analogue is framed as a characteristically Bronze Age character. A character that could only emerge because the Silver Age(ent) was, literally, dead. In this way these issues of *Astro City* make sense of comic book history through using references to characters, concepts and periodizations that have circulated widely amongst comic book readers. More interesting, however, is that referring to comic book history to make sense of it is not enough for its creators. Ultimately they make recourse to the more general historical context in which these characters and stories were created. Busiek and company use American history to make sense of comic book history, and in doing so, create a more general historical narrative using the past of the superhero genre.

However, if the Silver Agent stands for the Silver Age in *Astro City*, what has the Silver Age itself come to mean? For the most part recent allusions to the Silver Age have tended to construct one of two general impressions about the comics of that era. Each of these impressions tend to be associated with different aspects, moments and interpretations of American society during the late 1950's and early 1960's. Unsurprisingly, given their dominance of the comic book marketplace, these two impressions tend to correspond to, but not exactly fit with, the output of the two major superhero publishers: DC and Marvel. Unfortunately, due to space considerations I will focus, in this section, primarily on the way in which DC's Silver Age characters, creators,

aesthetics and narratives have become used by later comics interested in commenting upon both the history of comics and America.[163]

Allusions that draw on the imagery of the superhero revival of DC—particularly the work of editor Julius Schwartz, and artists Carmine Infantino and Curt Swan—tend to construct an image of the late 1950's and early 1960's as an era characterized by post-war consensus, optimism for the future, unflagging faith in science, technology and the institutions of American democracy. Within comic criticism this vision of the Silver Age and its context is generally labeled nostalgic and associated with the work of such writers as Kurt Busiek and Mark Waid.[164]

The narrator of the *Astro City* story "The Scoop," for instance, frames the Silver Age setting of an anecdote as follows:

> It was 1959. A dozen years since the city was rebuilt and renamed, two years past Sputnik and still a year or two until JFK would kill the hat for men. The Lamplighter and the All-American [Golden Age heroes in Busiek's *Astro City* continuity] had just announced their retirement, but it didn't feel like an ending… It felt like something was beginning—and there was nowhere in the world I'd rather have been than in Astro

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[163] However, for those readers looking for an excellent series of examples that are more Marvel-centric I would suggest looking at: Busiek, Kurt, and Ross, Alex *Marvels* for a somewhat nostalgic example of how early Marvel titles are seen to have articulated many of the social concerns of the 1960's. I would also strongly suggest reading: James Sturm, Guy Davis, R. Sikoryak, and Michel Vrana's *Unstable Molecules: The True Story of Comics' Greatest Foursome* for a very critical undercutting of nostalgia for the society of America in the late 1950's. The mini-series, purporting to be biographies of the 'real' people who inspired Marvel's Fantastic Four, ultimately paints a picture of the kind of family and society that found the Fantastic Four to be a 'realistic' fantasy when it first appeared in 1961. Finally I would suggest checking out Warren Ellis, John Cassidy, and Laura Depuis' *Planetary* for its fairly insightful reading of the relationship between ambivalent feelings about cold war militarism and technology and the Marvel characters of the 1960's. All of these are, of course, histories in fairly straightforward comic book form.

[164] Geoff Klock does so in chapter 2 of *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, p. 77-97, Mila Bongco puts forward a similar take on the two in *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books,* (Garland Publishing: New York, 2000) p.

City…the world around me was fresh and vital. There was spirit and

community -- a sense that we were all pulling together for the space race --

for democracy whatever was going on in the world -- we were a part of it.

We were a part of it -- and so was he. The Silver Agent. The poor, doomed

Silver Agent. To you, he's history. He was gone before you were even

born. But he'd been around only three years then, and none of us knew

what was coming. All we knew was his youth and confidence --the way he

symbolized something we all felt. The phrase 'the best and the brightest'

hadn't been coined yet, but that's what he was. Our best. Our brightest. A

new hero for a new era.[165]

Visually this exposition, placed within a series of text boxes, is spread over three

pages. These pages depict the city circa 1959, a place with uniformly smiling citizens,

cops directing traffic, prominent American flags and billboards that promise a better life

through electronics or feature superheroes innocently endorsing cigarettes. All in all, a

positive picture of the era that gives the impression of it possessing nearly limitless

potential and progressing towards some measure of social harmony is constructed within

these pages. As this example, and many others like it, illustrate there is an image of the

Silver Age, and by extension of America in the late fifties and early sixties, circulating

within comics that portrays it as an optimistic, dynamic, and progressive era both within

and outside of the comic books of that time.[166]

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[165] Busiek, Kurt, Anderson, Brent E., and Ross, Alex, *Astro City* #2 (September, 1995) p. 3-5.

[166] Some other examples would have to include many of the references to the early Legion of Super-Heroes, notably *LSH* #1 (vol. 3, 1989) and the mid-nineties reboot of the title that used visual elements of the early Legion in its, ultimately failed, attempt to imagine a new, believable, utopian future. A similar use can be found in the concluding pages of Mark Waid, Tom Peyer, and Barry Kitson's DC mini-series *The Brave and the Bold* (1999-2000), another good example can be found in the conclusion of James Robinson, Paul Smith, and Richard Ory's four part *The Golden Age*, a pessimistic look at America between the end of

If many contemporary comic book narratives deploy Silver Age aesthetics to create a nostalgic sense of period that conveys a sense of the Silver Age as, in terms of the comics produced and American society, the good old days, it is still remarkable that a good number of books employ the same aesthetics with a more critical eye. Nevertheless, like the televisual example of the 50's sitcom, these more critical treatments of both the comics and the society of America in the 50's and 60's allude to many of the same aesthetic elements, characters, creators and narrative landmarks as their more nostalgic cousins. An example of a text that uses the Silver Age and its signifiers in this manner can be found in Darwyn Cooke and Dave Stewart's *DC: The New Frontier*.

Cooke and Stewart's *DC: The New Frontier* (hereafter referred to as *New Frontier*) is a six part limited series set between 1945 and 1960. The series is somewhat akin to E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* with a sprawling, fragmented, and episodic narrative that blends some of the broader historical developments of post-war America with a superhero story that chronicles the end of the Golden Age of comics and the beginning of the Silver Age. Importantly, the series can be seen as creating links and moving back and forth between the history of the comic book industry, the superhero genre's own narrative of development, and a broader history of American society and culture in the post-war era. For example, one of the series' subplots revolves around DC's Golden Age characters, the big three included [Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman], struggling to adjust to the realities of the early 1950's. This subplot plays on the eclipse of superhero comics in the immediate post-war era and the Senate hearings that nearly destroyed the industry—industry history—the disappearance of most of these Golden Age heroes that

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the second World War and the beginning of the 1950's ends on an optimistic note using imagery of the coming Silver Age.

led to the Silver Age revival—genre history—mixed with a mediation on the anti-Communist fervor, American adventurism abroad, and the relative affluence of America during this period—general contextual history—thus putting forward an interpretation of the era that is multifaceted enough to be thought of as attempting to capture elements of the period's structure of feeling. The core of the book though, is a narrative that paints the immediate postwar era as a troubled, contradictory, and, often hypocritical time.

This is made explicit in the course of the series through its focus on some of the aspects of post-war America that are often papered over by more nostalgic accounts. Cooke shows us superheroes grappling with the moral ambiguity of the Korean War and, indeed, paints a critical picture of the United States' involvement in East Asia. The book's fourth chapter, entitled 'Gods and Monsters,' largely alternates between an argument over the United States,' mostly covert, involvement in French Indochina during the mid-1950's and a confused recent immigrant trying to acclimatise himself to American culture by watching television. Such passages would likely not look out of place in any number of serious works that blend history with fiction. Of course in this case the argument is between Superman and Wonder Woman and the immigrant is a man from Mars, at once making it conform to the superhero genre while simultaneously limiting the books' appeal to individuals who are not fans.

Nor are domestic developments ignored in favor of the dynamics of war and international intrigue. *New Frontier* employs the House Un-American Activities Committee as one of its principle foils, with the congressional witch-hunters forcing DC's Golden Age heroes to choose between retiring, working for the government or becoming outlaws. This development, something of convention in 'in-continuity'

histories of DC's universe, is emblematic of capacity of such stories to collapse distinct but related histories into each other; in this case the ups and downs of the superhero genre, the history of the industry—by not-so subtly referring to an era that put the homosexual subtext of Batman and Robin on trial—and the history of United States in such a way as to comment upon the perceived tensions and contradictions of American culture during that period, or at least to see the three as somewhat interchangeable.[167]

For the most part though, *New Frontier* continually emphasizes the role of fear in shaping American society in the 1950's. It creates a world where fear of communist invasion and nuclear war has led to military and intelligence organizations possessing far more power than they probably should have while sci-fi monster films that articulated these fears lead the book's Martian immigrant to work constantly at passing as a normal American. *New Frontier* paints a picture of an America that, while a largely prosperous place, is a dangerous place to be seen as different. Even for superheroes.

Perhaps the most interesting area where this plays out in the series is where it turns a potential weakness in using the history of DC comics' characters to tell a more general historical tale into a strength. This potential weakness is the total absence of African-American characters, never mind superheroes, in DC publications until the 1970's. This fact is not ignored and, instead, is the basis for much of the series' meditations on race relations in post-war America. Indeed, *New Frontier*'s examination of the widespread racism of the time is the ground for some its most compelling undercutting of the nostalgic image of the Silver Age.

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[167] This is a hallmark of DC Universe history. For instance, HUAC and communist witch hunts figure largely in James Robinson, Paul Smith, and Richard Ory's *The Golden Age*. The idea, was apparently first used in a four issue miniseries by Roy Thomas, Dann Thomas, Howard Bender, and Alfredo Alcala entitled *America Vs. The Justice Society of America* (1985).

For instance, one of the text pages that appear on the inside cover of nearly every issue sets this up explicitly. These pages, like the example from *Astro City: Local Heroes*, provide context for readers unfamiliar with American history and set the mood for an issue's content. Book three, titled "The Brave and the Bold" after one of DC's comics from the era, is set in 1957-58 and begins with a summary that reads:

> America was a scary place to be. The international arena had become interstellar, as America rushed to catch up to the Russian conquest of the stars. If the United States was to prevail against the Communist menace, it would have to win the race for space.
>
> The suburbs had replaced the urban apartments, and families became more insulated. With atomic angst, UFO paranoia, and a new medium called television shaping public opinion, Americans had their share of things to fear.
>
> The nation's record-breaking prosperity and growth was yours to take, as long as you supported the government's purge of "subversive societal elements." It was the era of what was legal over what was right. You could have it all if you turned a blind eye to your better nature. Of course, these were the problems you faced if you were white.
>
> God help you if you were black.[168]

In order to make up for the absence of any historical black superheroes that could be used to tell this aspect of their superheroic history of America in the 1950's, Cooke and Stewart create a new character and tell his tragic story. The character, named John Henry, is clearly inspired by a relatively recently created African-American superhero

named Steel.[169] Rather than making John Henry a well educated engineer who uses his wondrous inventions to fight crime, as does the contemporary Steel character, the *New Frontier* depicts the character as a veteran whose home is burned to the ground and whose family is murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in the deep south. Driven to revenge in this somewhat classic superhero origin, the character dons a sack cloth mask grabs a sledge hammer and sets out avenge himself on those that have oppressed him.

Unfortunately, this being a work that blends history and comic book lore to counter the more nostalgic images of the Silver Age, John Henry is not allowed a happy ending or a place in DC's pantheon of superheroes. Further the character, whose struggle is obviously quite moving, is doomed not to be able to 'fix' race relations in the American south, in the 1950's. As Lipsitz points out, historical fictions are "public texts touching audiences with historical memories, popular novels have some responsibility for historical accuracy in order to be perceived as credible. At the very least, they cannot disregard collective historical memory."[170]

In a particularly distressing scene, the wounded vigilante, pursued by a mob of Klansmen, seeks help from a young white girl. In one panel, a tight close up on the hero's desperate eyes, John Henry asks "Please child… Help me. Hide me." The next panel is a wordless, slightly less tight, close up on the blonde-haired, blue-eyed, child's face. The suspense built up (surely she'll help him I thought as I read it), the third and final panel on the page is akin to an establishing shot with John Henry lying in the middle of the

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[168] Cooke, Darwyn, Stewart, Dave, *DC: The New Frontier* #3 (DC, May 2004) inside cover.
[169] Steel was introduced into the DC continuity in the aftermath of the 'death of Superman' event in 1993 as one of four contenders seeking to replace the man of steel. He was also featured in 1997 in a low budget film starring Shaquille O'Neal.
[170] Lipsitz, p. 229

panel and the girl, standing above him, shouting "He's Here! He's Here! The nigger's over here!."[171]

The next three pages, done entirely in a bluish gray palate, feature a news report on the character's murder and the plight of African Americans in the south and reactions across America to the situation. The passage is compelling in its fairly unflinching assessment of the racial inequalities of the time and its use of a fictional program, 'the big picture,' in a manner that simultaneously conjures up images of the golden age of television. Here, despite the books' use of many of the trappings of the superhero genre, the creators have chosen to put forward a harrowing history lesson rather than conform to the more upbeat ending a more straightforward superhero story may have had.

Nevertheless, the overall tone that the series ends on is upbeat and can, perhaps, be seen as merely a slightly qualified version of the nostalgic images of the Silver Age that circulate in text's *Astro City*. To a certain like extent, the series' complex relationship to more nostalgic impressions of the Silver Age and the society that it was a part of is made explicit within the series' very title. *New Frontier* ends with a nine page montage of images linked by text boxes containing the Kennedy speech of the same name. The images are, like the speech itself, largely uplifting and serve to equate the superhero characters with the 'Camelot' optimism so often associated with JFK.[172] However, this does not leave us with the same kind of nostalgic image of unqualified optimism and consensus found in other allusions to the Sliver Age. The very use of Kennedy, himself a figure nearly as mythical as many of the fictional heroes, implies that this optimism is

[171] *New Frontier* #4 p. 22.
[172] Interestingly, most of the villainous characters, include Lex Luthor of 'Lexco' are associated not with external threats but with the portions of his speech concerning internal difficulties.

unwarranted and that the sense of positive change at the end of the story will not, ultimately, last.

In summary, *New Frontier* can be considered to put forward a limited vision of the structure of feeling of postwar America for several reasons. The first is that it draws upon a wide range of the conventions, characters, and stories that are considered to typify the Silver Age as a period of comic book publication. Further, many of these references to comic book history are likely to be accessible to most readers of the series given the importance of this knowledge to comic book fans, as outline in chapters two and three of this thesis.

By positing a relationship between the content of the era and more concrete cultural developments within the United States of that era—anti-Communist fervor, the rise of television, American foreign adventures, widespread racism, economic affluence, and cold war fears—*New Frontier* can be seen as attempting to both relate Silver Age texts to their context and articulate a sense of the lived experience of existing within the America of the post-war period. Finally, the series not only puts forward the moral ideal embodied in the Silver Age superhero as one of the social characters of the era, but shows that such ideals were in conflict, even then, with other cultural forces and the social realities of the period. Indeed, the social character, defined by Williams as "a valued system of behavior and attitudes—is taught, formally and informally; it is both an ideal and a mode," put forward, and likely seen as informally taught, in Silver Age comics is situated within *New Frontier* as an impossible ideal, more a product of wishful thinking than the practiced values of the time.[173]

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[173] Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 47.

Taken together, these factors demonstrate that *New Frontier* puts forward a limited representation of the post-war era's structure of feeling. Since this representation of history is ultimately rooted in a popular form and draws upon the extensive knowledge of the form's dedicated fans, it and texts like it—although *New Frontier* is exemplary—can be placed among those textual resources that are seen to inform our collective memory. To a certain degree, reflexive popular culture texts like *New Frontier* are fascinating in their ability to blur the distinction between our memories of popular culture and our more general sense of history; using each to build upon the other.

However, such an ability would be impossible if it were not for the other aspects of the comic's scene this thesis has explored. Were it not for the industry's legal capacity to profitably own trademarked character properties—and their interest in keeping them accessible to contemporary audiences—the wide ranging changes to the styles and histories of such characters and the comics they appear in would likely not have become quite as distinct and easy for later creators to employ as historical markers. On the other hand, if it was not for the emergence of dedicated fans as the core audience for most superhero comics, the circulation of older comic texts in forms like the reprint and the importance placed upon mastering knowledge of comic book history within fandom—along with the various techniques and products designed to disseminate this knowledge—it seems unlikely that later comic book creators would feel confident that their references to comic books past would be understood. Ultimately, the coming together of all of these elements has allowed a situation where a book like *New Frontier* can appeal to fandom's desire to know their own history: both as fans and as North Americans.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored some aspects of the relationship between collective

memory, history and popular culture, particularly as it pertains to the American superhero

comic. To do so I have examined some of the reasons behind and ways that the American

comic book industry change their superhero character properties over time. More

specifically, this has entailed stressing the role of the ownership of character properties in

the industry and the resulting economic need to alter their characters to both resonate

with contemporary audiences and keep them accessible to new readers.

Nevertheless, despite the industry's attempts to rid their characters of

cumbersome backstories, rarely do the stories, characters and artifacts of comic book

history ever entirely go away. Rather comic book history continues to play a vital role in

comic book fandom. To illustrate this I examined the development and role of comic

book reprints in the industry and, to a lesser extent, comic book fandom. In a similar vein,

I explored the role that knowledge of a character's—or a publisher's stable of

characters'—diagetic history plays in contemporary superhero narratives and how such

knowledge is disseminated. Both of these studies concluded that both knowledge and

appreciation of past comic books play a vital role in contemporary comic book narratives

and fandom.

Finally, I examined how discarded elements of past comic books come into play

as allusions in some later superhero narratives. I argued that such allusions have been

used as a means to discuss and represent the historical moments that the alluded to

elements of past comic books are associated with. Further, given the importance placed on knowledge of comic book history within fandom, I argued that such allusive comics are one of the many textual resources that some theorists consider vital to understanding contemporary collective memory.

Although it was my intention to produce work that could be applied to understand other areas of popular culture, I have nevertheless attempted to ground my thesis in the particularities of the American superhero comic. This has largely been in terms of its specific operations as a business, a genre, and a series of particular texts with particular histories. Were I to continue to do research in this field it would likely be along several different lines.

To begin with, I would like to do further research into collective memory. Specifically, I would continue to explore how memories of mass media texts, and particularly fictional texts, relate to our broader sense of our culture's history. I sincerely believe that there remains much to be discovered and understood by pursuing such a subject.

In terms of further research on comic books, I believe that further work on the changes in the physical format and distribution of American comic books is necessary. One of the major stumbling blocks I found in my study of reprints was that little or no attention had been paid to the history of that practice. While comic book fans and scholars seem to agree that the emergence of original graphic novels, trade paperback and hardback collections of comic books have dramatically changed the industry in terms of the sales and content of contemporary comics, I could find no sources on exactly how this came to be. For example, I feel it would be useful to pin down exactly when trade

paperbacks began to get broad distribution in bookstores and at what point the assemblage of successful comic book issues into book compilations became the norm, rather than the exception. Finally, I suspect that a history of the failed attempts by the industry to find alternative formats and forms of distribution for their products—such as DC's short-lived experimentation with the digest format in the early 1980's—would raise some interesting questions about how and why trade paperbacks have come to be so prominent in the contemporary comics' scene. Such a history would likely provide some insight into how the comic book industry shaped the contemporary market, or vice versa.

Having discussed those areas of future research that my thesis has opened up, it will be useful to discuss what I have actually written and the conclusions that can be drawn from it. My first chapter attempted to do two things. Firstly, it tried to describe some of the ways in which the superhero genre changes, and why. After all, in order for something to be outdated it needs to have first fallen into the dustbin of history. Further, I argued that many of the more substantial changes were attempts to update characters and aspects of their mythos considered too old-fashioned for contemporary audiences or were attempts to simplify the often convoluted back stories of superhero characters in order to make them accessible to new audiences. However, this tendency is, at best, cyclical since one moment's 'up to date' is another's 'hopelessly out of date.'

Secondly, this chapter tried to disentangle, albeit temporarily, superheroes as character properties from comic books as a medium. This move was largely done to get a better grip upon why the moves listed above to keep these characters saleable to licensees are so necessary from a business point of view. Further, I hoped to correct a tendency within comic book scholarship to separate the creation and maintenance of trademarked

characters from the actual works, including those created by canonized creators like Alan Moore, that comic book companies publish. Rather, I tried to point out how interrelated these activities often are.

My second chapter focused on one of the ways that comic book history circulates: the reprint. While my first chapter largely focused on how comic book publishers worked to keep their characters accessible to contemporary audiences, often at the expense of the published history of such characters, this chapter looked at how old stories are kept in circulation. Anchoring this chapter was an analysis of the *DC Archives* line of hardcover reprints and a condensed history of the reprint as a product at DC comics.

To a certain extent, I argued that the development of the reprint at DC comics can be seen as paralleling the growth in importance of comic book fandom as a market. In the *DC Archives* line this tendency is at its most visible through ads for the line that espouse both its quality as a material object and as documents of providing access to comic books past. Ultimately, I concluded that large portion of the appeal of such high-quality reprints was their claim to being representative of comic book history and that the knowledge and, in some cases, experience of comic book history plays an important role in contemporary fandom.

In a similar vein, my third chapter focused on how knowledge about the superhero genre and its history circulates within comic book culture. The underlying premise of this chapter was that a degree of familiarity with the genre and expository knowledge of a character or title is an almost inevitable aspect of the serial form comic books have taken in recent decades. Even in the case of books that have been 'rebooted' and had their stories essentially restarted from scratch quickly build up enough history to require such

knowledge. Thus, this chapter set out to explore some of the pedagogical techniques and products used by the industry and fans to make new readers familiar with such knowledge. Further, I pointed out that even 'expert' fans that are intimately familiar with the details of a given character or creator often seek out and derive part of their pleasure as fans from acquiring it.

Drawing on some of the work on genre, and the soap opera in particular, I argued that many of the superhero narrative's conventions—likely out of economic interest—seemed to aid in the process of familiarizing new readers. For the most part however, I focused on the roll of two broad techniques that I labeled as referencing and retelling. These techniques, I argued, have particular importance within the superhero genre, at least in its comic book form, that demonstrate the importance of narrative/expository knowledge in contemporary comics. I also argued that these very techniques also play an important role in establishing which stories 'count' in a particular character or company owned universes' diagetic history.

The final chapter of this thesis attempted to bring the themes of the first three chapters, change, an awareness of change, and memories of what was, together. This took the form of a tentative examination of the relationship between our perceptions of pop culture past and a broader sense of period that structures a more general sense of collective memory. Employing several theorists of collective memory along with Raymond Williams' notion of structure of feeling—or at least elements of it as it appeared in *The Long Revolution* and *Marxism and Literature*—I argued that allusions employing the aesthetic features of older comics are often employed as a kind of visual shorthand for a set of more general historical concerns associated with a particular era.

As a case study, I looked at how the aesthetics of the Silver Age have regularly taken on a set of meanings beyond merely denoting a style prevalent between 1956 and 1970. Rather, I argued that the style of the Silver Age has come to stand for a particular vision of the late 1950's and early 1960's to such an extent that both nostalgic and more critical comic book stories set in that era regularly employ them for such an effect. Such allusions to pop culture past, ultimately, inform our thinking not only of older media texts but of the eras that produced them.

Thus, I have attempted to simultaneously broaden and narrow the focus of this work. In theory, I hope that this thesis has shed some light on the ways in which our memories of popular culture texts and forms can intermingle and interact with our more general sense of our society's past. More specifically, I have tried to look at instances where the aesthetics of older poplar culture texts are deployed in later texts in such a way that not only are they explicitly framed as 'old' but are used to signify ideas we have about the historical context in which they were created. Further, I hoped to understand some of the necessary preconditions for such uses of pop culture past to be understood as widely and easily as they are. Finally, while American superhero comics have been the overarching case study of this thesis, it is my sincere hope that this aspect of my work can be applied more broadly.

In the case of comic books, however, hopefully it is clear that comics like *Astro City* or *New Frontier* can employ elements of the Silver Age in a manner that not only engages with the aesthetic qualities that differentiate them from comics from other periods but explore the relationship between Silver Age comics and the broader context in which they were created. I further hope that because of this these texts cannot be

dismissed as simply nostalgic, although there may be a nostalgic quality to them. Rather I have tried to illustrate that nostalgic and more critical looks at the history of comics and the socio-cultural context in which they are created exist side by side, drawing upon the same stock of characters, imagery, and stories that circulate within comic book culture.

Such works that intermingle our knowledge of comic book and more general American history certainly draw upon our affective sense of what other times were like. A sense that is no doubt as much a construction of other popular texts than it is the result of more professional historical work. Not only do these comics draw upon such knowledge, but in many cases they may contribute, reinforce, or even undercut our pre-existing ideas about the past. Although such memory work may seem banal, I believe that events like the Cold War are now receding far enough into the past that we may need reminders of how terrifying and culturally influential they were.

However, all of this is not say that we should drop history as a subject in favor of a vigorous program of watching television and reading comic books. There are certainly limitations to superheroic history. To begin with, such narratives are far more useful at putting across broad ideas, themes, impressions and feelings about the past than they are at dealing with specific issues or historical developments in any kind of depth. At best they provide a colorful framework in which one hopes that people will read more detailed historical works. At worst they can reduce American history to 'witch hunts bad, Kennedy good.' Of course, it should be pointed out that this is a limitation shared with many other fictional and semi-fictional popular texts that engage with history, particularly things like biopics or television mini-series.[174]

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[174]Edgerton, Gary R, "Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether," in *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, p. 1-3.

Finally, and more seriously, is that superhero stories that engage with the past are ultimately bound to the conventions and history of the superhero genre, even if they are working at undercutting them. Such stories are still likely to be about exceptional people, centered in America and end on a positive note after some sort of physical confrontation. Further the sad reality that there was a near total dearth of non-white superhero characters from the inception of the genre until the 1970's—and this not to ignore the ongoing issues with the representation of characters who are not white men within comics—places a whole series of additional limitations and dangers for fashioning more general histories out of the cloth of comic book history.

In the end, I have attempted to provide a framework allowing us to look at some aspects of the intertexuality of contemporary superhero comics without limiting it to simple nostalgia or fannish nods to readers in the know. Rather, I argued that allusions to comic books past can function as a compelling storytelling device that engages a reader's knowledge of both the text and context of superhero narratives. Beyond this, it is my belief that the reflexive use of the aesthetics of past pop culture texts by later texts has become one of the cornerstones of how we understand our own past, not in terms of great or important events, but in the more intangible, affective way we frame this understanding. I hope I have successfully argued that the Silver Age, tarnished or not, will likely remain one of the resources with which comic book readers and creators comprehend the late fifties and sixties.

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