

# The Aesthetic Intensity of Superheroes

An autoethnographic interpretation of contemporary superhero popularity

by

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## Abstract

The central claim of this dissertation is that aesthetic intensity is a characteristic that can be attributed to the superhero genre. The argument supporting this claim is that, while superheroes have always had the quality of aesthetic intensity, since 2000, an increase in seriality and the spread within the superhero genre of new forms of melodrama (what I term 'superdrama') have combined to amplify the genre's potential for aesthetic intensity. My argument is situated in relation to an established and growing *research methodology* that is sociological and ethnographic, with clear and explicit ties to postmodern sensibilities: autoethnography. My *theoretical principles* are derived from this method, which legitimates personal experience as an object of analysis, a necessary step for me to take up the topic of aesthetic intensity.

After reviewing the historical development of autoethnography into a cutting-edge sociological method, I turn to second-hand statistical information that points to current superhero comic sales being near their all-time low. I interpret that trend with respect to another current phenomenon, the proliferation of superheroes into new cultural spaces such as Hollywood blockbusters and adult-aimed advertising. I argue that this proliferation is linked to the recently increased potential of the genre for aesthetic intensity, and that both of these phenomena can be traced to changes in the genre related, first, to its increasingly serial structure and, second, its increasingly melodramatic content. To support those claims I provide an interpretive, partial history of superheroes in comics, on television and in film. After charting those changes I bring the threads of this work together in the final chapter in order to support my claim that superheroes have the characteristic of aesthetic intensity by explaining the concept and providing several examples.

## Acknowledgements

My mother Viviane, my father Fred and my sister Jessica put up with me, and my comic collection, from the earliest days.

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Emmett, if you're reading this, I hope you like what your daddy wrote and thought.

Robyn my love, thank you for our good, good life! This dissertation is, of course, dedicated to you. Finally!

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# Introduction

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The *central claim* of this dissertation is that aesthetic intensity is a characteristic that can be attributed to the superhero genre. Aesthetic intensity is a concept developed by literary and social theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht in order to consider the ways in which “‘moments of intensity’ or of lived experience” are evoked by certain experiences and are, in turn, experienced not only intellectually, but physically as well (Gumbrecht 2004, 99). By ‘superhero genre’, I mean deployments of the superhero figure – defined at the end of this introduction – that usually take a narrative form, but can also include still or moving images without narrative context. This claim emerges in response to a *research problem*, the apparent contradiction between my own impression of a recent increase in the popularity of superheroes, and the material fact of all-time low sales figures for superhero comic books.

The *argument* supporting this claim is that, while superheroes have always had the quality of aesthetic intensity, since 2000, an increase in seriality and the spread within the superhero genre of new forms of melodrama (what I term ‘superdrama’) have combined to amplify the genre’s potential for aesthetic intensity. This, in turn, has resulted in an unprecedented proliferation of superheroes within mainstream, adult popular culture, as they have been put to work in places and ways entirely new for the genre. My argument proceeds in two stages. In the first stage, I assess the current, material reality of dollars earned by superhero comics and films with respect to their historical material earnings, and interpret these findings as conflicting with respect to superhero popularity. In the second stage, I catalogue some of the many instances of superhero proliferation into new cultural spaces and uses, and then present a partial and interpretive history of the superhero genre that highlights

the generic changes related to seriality and melodrama that, I believe, have resulted in increased aesthetic intensity and contributed to the proliferation of superheroes within popular culture. My arguments alternate between wide-ranging examinations that cover different publishers, comic series and media, and close readings of some exemplary cases, including two Superman comics published over 50 years apart, several superhero television programs from the 1970s and 2000s, and some recent superhero films.

My argument is situated in relation to an established and growing tradition of qualitative *research methodology* that is sociological and ethnographic, with clear and explicit ties to postmodern sensibilities: autoethnography. My *theoretical principles* are derived from this method, which legitimates personal experience as an object of analysis, a necessary step for me to take up the topic of aesthetic intensity. Aesthetic intensity is an embodied, pre-rational sensation and as such can only be analyzed within a framework that accepts subjective experience as a legitimate topic of scholarly attention. By admitting personal experience into sociological analysis, autoethnography refutes a subject/object divide on which many other, more traditional forms of social science depend. The autoethnographic tradition, on the other hand, insists that the subjective experiences of the author are legitimate ground for analysis, on the grounds that individual biography cannot but be imbricated within contextual, social relations.

This dissertation makes five important contributions to scholarly inquiry. My argument contributes the novel theoretical point that aesthetic intensity is a characteristic that can be attributed to the superhero genre. By developing my argument through autoethnography, this work contributes the first application of the autoethnographic method to the study of the superhero genre, thereby also suggesting a new, sociological methodology

for comics studies, a growing field of academic research in relation to which this dissertation is also situated. By bringing the study of superheroes to sociology via autoethnography, this dissertation contributes to the expansion of sociology as well. By taking up the concept of aesthetic intensity through the lens of superheroes, this dissertation contributes new understandings of that concept. And, in analyzing the history of superheroes with a focus on their seriality and the development of what I call 'superdrama', this dissertation presents a novel interpretation of the history and ways of experiencing that genre.

To elaborate the process behind this dissertation – that is, the processes through which I analyzed my 'data', consumed and considered superhero products – is challenging. This stems in large measure from the fact that, in the language of ethnography, I am an 'insider' of the community and phenomena I 'studied' for this dissertation (more on this in chapter one) in that I situate myself as already-enmeshed in the key activities and social relations that constitute a fan of superheroes: I have 'lived and breathed' superheroes for most of my life, buying and reading their comics, watching their programs and films, but also discussing them with friends and strangers in comics specialty shops and comic conventions, thinking about their stories and using them as one tool through which to interpret the world around me. Therefore I am unlike a scholar who, for the purposes of a project, embarks on research into a new, unfamiliar topic with 'fresh eyes' and, perhaps, an all-new reading strategy. Rather, my consumptive and analytical processes for this work were motivated by a question, which became the research problem of this dissertation, that immediately betrays my already-existing interest in and bias towards superheroes: why were they suddenly so popular? I return to this problem below and in more detail in chapter two. It was necessary to raise this point now, however, in order to explain that the 'reading' I did

for this work was an *interested* reading<sup>1</sup>, one searching within superhero stories for what might account for some change in their popularity around the year 2000. In other words, I was convinced of my impression that something about their popularity, or the ways in which they were considered or used within popular culture, had changed, and began seeking, not evidence of those changes, but causes of them. Whether reflecting on stories I had consumed in the past, revisiting those stories, or consuming new stories, my attention was on details that would stand out to me as somehow attributable to what I thought of as the new popularity of superheroes.

Such work is not unfamiliar within the field of comics studies, a literature I discuss below. Comics scholar Jean-Paul Gabilliet recently noted “a notable growth in works written by academics who bracketed their fannish enthusiasms in order to produce rigorous studies” (Gabilliet, Beaty et al. 2010, 304). Like other academics who are also ‘comics insiders’, my longtime fandom has provided me with a wealth of occasionally encyclopedic knowledge to draw on. I can present extremely detailed accounts of some aspects of some comics, some television programs, some films and some characters, pointing out easy-to-miss details and highlighting nuanced patterns and motifs that ‘outsiders’ might miss. Like many other scholars, I realize that I cannot switch off my lifelong devotion to these characters and this genre, which have, without doubt, influenced my attitudes and ways of engaging with the world at a very basic, fundamental level of cognition. What makes me different from the scholars to whom Gabillet refers, or at least makes this dissertation different from other

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<sup>1</sup> As I make clear in the next chapter on autoethnography, an autoethnographic methodology presumes that all readings are interested in some way, and rejects the notion of a purely objective or agnostic engagement with objects of study.

'fannish' but 'rigorous' studies, is my introduction of autoethnography as a means of exploring and articulating the legitimacy of such introspective work for social science in general, including both sociology and comics scholarship. I hope to see autoethnographic sensibilities grow within comics scholarship since, as I outline below, those few works in which it is already at play are the ones that present the greatest appeal, at least from my perspective.

## **Situating this Project**

### **The Research Problem**

Explaining the research problem to which this dissertation is addressed requires that I engage in some initial autoethnographic reflection since, in some sense, I have been performing this analysis since before I could read. Some of my earliest memories involve sensory impressions of Spider-Man from still images, toys and an actor in a very ill-fitting costume on the children's television program *The Electric Company*. I am old enough to remember asking my father to purchase a 25 cent *Micronauts* comic from a newsstand, something not seen on the streets of Montreal in almost 40 years. And of course I have watched superheroes on television and in films since I was first granted access to those media, which was quite early on for me, as it was for many children growing up in the 1970s and 80s.

When I was eight years old I asked a baby-sitter how the Spider-Man of the 1960s cartoon was able to swing from his web-line from above every building in New York; when I was 20 years old I marveled at how much faster and more athletically the Spider-Man in the 1990s cartoon moved than he had in the 1960s cartoon; and I had the same reaction again in my thirties watching the live-action Spider-Man films and the 2008 cartoon, *Spectacular Spider-*

*Man.* In effect, multi-media superheroes have been part of my life since its beginning – unusual, perhaps, not because the connection started so early but because it continued, relatively unabated, into ‘adulthood’. With that much accrued familiarity with a topic, one cannot help but gain impressions of the ways that others appreciate or engage with that topic. By my late teenage years, I was quite aware that superheroes, if not quite a distasteful or shameful topic for discussion, were also not quite a ‘normal’ topic of conversation either. Adults, in my experience, did not discuss superheroes unless they were fully-involved ‘comic collectors’ (or, as those outside the community usually called us, comic geeks). Superheroes were not mass entertainment; they were a very niche interest that did not receive attention outside their highly devoted circle of fans.

So I was quite surprised and confused when, in the mid-1990s, friends tried convince me to watch the comedy program *Seinfeld* by promising me that the characters sometimes discussed superheroes. At the time, having long thought of myself as a comic collector – storing my comics in plastic bags and specially-sized boxes for careful preservation – I found this so baffling an occurrence that I initially assumed my friends to be lying. But, indeed, an early episode of *Seinfeld* included a sequence where the title character discusses with a friend the more confusing minutiae of Aquaman’s abilities when above water and whether or not Superman’s abilities include being super-funny (June 1990, episode 4). In a later episode, the quirky character Kramer is recounting his adventure on a New York city bus, fighting off an attempted attack on the bus driver while simultaneously trying to pilot the bus himself and continuing to make all the stops (because “people kept ringing the bell”). One character, amazed by the story, exclaims “you’re Batman!” to which Kramer calmly responds “I AM Batman.” It is difficult to describe the shock I felt at these sequences, the amazement that

characters over which I felt a large measure of ownership were suddenly being discussed on prime-time television.

In retrospect, I believe this to have been my first indication of superheroes entering a new, larger sphere of public awareness, or at least of popular culture. Those sequences were likely intended as comedy about the characters' lack of maturity, a recurring theme of the program. But what is more important is that the sequences did not *ridicule* superheroes, presenting them instead as a topic that adults might reference casually or even converse about. Superheroes were, rather suddenly, a topic about which comedy – not simple ridicule – was possible. As a result, adult viewers of a nationally televised prime-time sitcom ended up watching 1-2 minutes *about superheroes*. Superheroes had never been something discussed casually in any setting, or something referred to on popular – and, by all accounts at the time, somewhat revolutionary – adult comedy programs. These casual discussions of and passing references to superheroes were something new, not only within my own experience, but within popular culture as well. As has comic book writer Grant Morrison, I have

been aware of comic books' range, and of the big ideas and emotions they can communicate, for a long time now, so it's with amazement and a little pride that I've watched the ongoing, bloodless surrender of mainstream culture to relentless colonization from the geek hinterlands. Names that once were arcane outsider shibboleths now front global marketing campaigns. Batman, Spider-Man, X-Men, Green Lantern, Iron Man. Why have superheroes become so popular? Why now? (Morrison 2011, xvi).

This work is based on the puzzling observation I made around 2000, that superheroes seemed to be infiltrating mainstream popular culture in ways unprecedented in their sixty-plus year history. As with Morrison, my shock at that phenomenon caused me to wonder at its cause – that is, what might have changed within or without the superhero genre to account for its completely new status as, to put it colloquially, not something nerdy?

Morrison offers two possible answers, and I agree with his first assertion that “like chimpanzees, superheroes, make everything more entertaining... Conventional murder mystery? Add superheroes and a startling and provocative new genre springs to life” (Morrison 2011, xvi). But while he sees this answer as simple and possibly glib, to me it begs the further question of why the genre became widely accepted around 2000, as opposed to any other point in the sixty-plus-year history of superheroes?<sup>2</sup>

But that was only part of the research problem for this dissertation. As I elaborate in chapter two, claiming increased or new popularity for superheroes is difficult given that their ‘home medium’, the comic book, has shown flagging sales since 2007, placing superhero comic sales around their lowest point in the history of superhero comics. But, as I also discuss in chapter two, there can be no doubt that superheroes are also appearing in new places, being used in new ways, being consumed by more people (in that there have been numerous superhero ‘blockbuster’ films in recent years) and have, in general, entered the mainstream, adult lexicon and field of awareness in unprecedented ways.

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<sup>2</sup> Morrison’s second answer, an attempt to theorize an answer “beneath the surface,” is to wonder whether “a culture starved of optimistic images of its own future has turned to the primary source in search of utopian role models?” (Morrison 2011, xvii). Though the phrasing is particular to a superhero fan and writer, the sentiment echoes the kinds of responses I received most frequently in casual conversation about my dissertation topic. In almost every instance, regardless of my discussant’s academic field of inquiry or emotional attachment to superheroes, the immediate response was some variation on ‘maybe in these difficult times people want to believe in heroes who just do good’. Though I enjoy the sentiment, I have never seen this as a convincing argument, mainly because I do not believe ‘our times’ to be particularly less or more ‘complex’, ‘confusing’, ‘insecure’ or otherwise difficult than other ‘times’. For example, at the height of the Cold War in the 1980s, an extended period of pervasive uncertainty about and public discussion of global nuclear war and destruction, superheroes were nowhere to be found in mainstream popular culture. It seems clear to me that the answer to newfound superhero popularity is substantially more complex than a desire on the part of society for comfort via a return to simple stories of colourful heroics – hence, this work.

The research problem for this sociological dissertation, then, is, *why, as a self-identified superhero fan, do I have the impression of increased superhero popularity, when superhero comics sales are at their historical low?* To investigate that problem requires that this dissertation focus in part on my own impressions of and experiences with superheroes, and so I employ the autoethnographic methodology mentioned above and discussed, in detail, in the next chapter. But this dissertation is also situated in relation, and makes a methodological contribution, to two other literatures, popular culture scholarship and comics scholarship, which I discuss briefly here.

### **Popular Culture scholarship<sup>3</sup>**

Superheroes are one kind of popular culture, and popular culture – its legitimacy, the forms in which it is produced and consumed, and its importance in social relations – are standard topics of cultural studies and/or the sociology of culture. The long history of cultural studies<sup>4</sup>, with its roots that lie in the literary and social/ cultural criticism of Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis, demonstrates slow acceptance of ‘mass’ or popular culture as worthy of earnest study.

British scholars Arnold and Leavis both decried the entry of the working-class into political life as a potentially disastrous destabilizer of traditional values, most importantly in

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<sup>3</sup> I am unaware of others using this term, which is my own creation. I use it here, rather than ‘cultural studies’ or ‘sociology of culture’, because those literatures investigate many other topics beside popular culture and my short review here focuses only on some of the important texts in both literatures that have paid close attention to popular culture.

<sup>4</sup> What follows is a quick overview that is not intended to do full justice to over a century of academic inquiry. It is intended, rather, to highlight in the most efficient manner possible what seem to me to have been the key trends in the field as it moved away from its early, mostly derogatory approach to what is now called popular culture, in which I certainly include superheroes.

matters of culture and art, with an ultimate possibility for social anarchy (Storey 2006, 6-8, 14-15). Arnold set the stage in 1869 by asserting that “[c]ulture is then properly described not as having its origin in curiosity, but as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is a *study of perfection*” (Arnold 2006, 34), a study that could be led only by the educated middle classes who had a responsibility to guide the other classes toward that perfection. Most academic studies of culture (as opposed to art, which received far different treatment) in the first half of the twentieth century followed the path laid out by Arnold and, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Leavis, developing into an approach now labeled as ‘classicism’<sup>5</sup> that includes works based in literary criticism, Marxist, Frankfurt School, Freudian and other intellectual camps, but all with the central notion that ‘mass culture’ was pabulum by and/or for the working-class who either did not or could not know better than to avoid it at all costs.<sup>6</sup>

New threads of Marxist interest in culture began to emerge around the middle of the twentieth century. These ‘culturalists’, E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams foremost among them, maintained a negative opinion of ‘mass culture’ as those cultural products produced in order to pacify the working class, but contributed new appreciation for, and theorizations of, the democratizing potential inherent in local, small-scale production of

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<sup>5</sup> Brantlinger (1983) offers a detailed and comprehensive review of the classicist body of work.

<sup>6</sup> Some examples of such works include Haag 1957; Haag 1961; Handlin 1961; Jacobs 1961; Rosten 1961; Shils 1961; Marcuse 1964; Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; Mattelart, Mattelart et al. 1984; Greenberg 1991; Adorno and Horkheimer 1993; Adorno 2002. Although Hannah Arendt’s “Society and Culture” (1961) falls into this category as well, it deserves some distinction for making a less discriminatory and more rational argument against mass culture than most works of the same ilk. Asserting that “[a]n object is cultural to the extent that it can endure” (Arendt 1961, 49), Arendt goes on to argue that while legitimate cultural objects – or ‘art’ – do endure, the “commodities the entertainment industry offers” have been “functionalized”, or reduced to their exchange value, and thus are “goods destined to be used up, as are any other consumer goods” (Arendt 1961, 49). The argument has merit, but is nonetheless confounded by the case of superheroes (among other genre figures), who have endured for over sixty years.

material culture by those who would also consume it (as opposed to cultural artifacts produced industrially).<sup>7</sup> Over time that approach developed into what has become known as British Cultural Studies, which spread from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, at the University of Birmingham in England through the 1960s and 70s. Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, Angela McRobbie, Paul Willis<sup>8</sup> and many others broadened the field that was just becoming known as cultural studies by beginning to take seriously the uses to which all forms of culture – material, mass, high and other – were put by those who consumed them. From this perspective, what had until then been generally referred to in a derogatory manner as ‘mass culture’, began to be taken seriously as important ‘sub-cultures’, complex processes of meaning-making engaged in by all classes, age-groups, genders and races, and all of it deserving of earnest academic inquiry – even, for example, rock and roll music. Though it broadened the field of inquiry, Birmingham Cultural Studies held its Marxist roots close, thanks in large measure to the adoption of Antonio Gramsci’s notion of ‘hegemony’, which theorized capitalism as an ongoing class struggle (rather than simple domination) in which the political and economic elite were, despite their social power, required to ‘articulate’ the demands of the working-class to their own societal goals (Bennett 1986a; Bennett 1986b). In short, whatever the cultural topic under investigation, the theme of cultural studies through that period tended usually to return to questions of class consciousness and, in theory, emancipation of the working-class ‘consumers’ from the tainted creations of bourgeois ‘producers’.

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<sup>7</sup> For a small sampling, see Williams 1961; Hall and Whannel 1964; Hoggart 1970; Williams 1975.

<sup>8</sup> A few examples include Hall and Whannel 1964; Willis 1978; Frith 1981; Allor 1988; McRobbie 1994; Hall 2006.

By the late 1970s however, post-structuralist and -modernist intellectuals were working to blur, if not completely erase the line separating producers and consumers as part of the larger political project of questioning, destabilizing and ultimately overturning traditional notions of authority and power.<sup>9</sup> Part of the effect of this work was to push cultural studies even further afield from its historical roots, to the point that traditional materialist frameworks were dropped in favour of approaches stemming from semiotics, gender studies, and other broadly post-modernist frameworks. As a result, since the mid-1980s, cultural studies has increasingly taken popular culture as a legitimate area of study, to the effect that “[t]he redefinition of popular culture studies has made problematic earlier views of mass culture as degraded and elite culture as elevating. Instead, new studies recognize the power of the ordinary, accept the commonplace as legitimate object of inquiry, hammer away at the often arbitrary and ideological distinctions between popular, mass, and elite culture, and ask serious questions about the role of popular culture in political and social life” (Mukerji and Schudson 1991, 2). This shift mirrors shifts in ethnography around the same period that led to the development of autoethnography, with its similar emphasis on everyday experiences and interpretation of those experiences for scholarly purposes. For example Jennifer Hayward performed an investigation of serialized forms of popular culture, one of the earliest seriously to consider seriality as a legitimate topic of research. Among other sophisticated arguments, she makes the important point that the serial “genre is not constituted... by purely formal and thematic considerations. Rather, these considerations are

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<sup>9</sup> For a small selection, see Barthes 1974; Barthes 1979; Foucault ; DeCerteau 1988; Derrida 1996.

inseparable from the unique reading practices and interpretive tactics developed by audiences, practices that include collaborative, active reading; interpretation; prediction; occasional rewriting or creation of new subplots” (Hayward 1997, 4). In similar vein, Duncan Webster directly addresses the pleasures enjoyed by consumers of popular culture, which he refers to as “the blind spot of much past Marxist and feminist analysis,” calling it “poststructuralist jouissance [that] inserts the body into cultural studies as a site of resistance, respectively reconstructing the propriety of power or empowering the consumer” (Webster 2006, 579). Many popular culture scholars, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, did similar work in the postmodern spirit, attempting to bring consideration of consumers’ pleasure to the centre of cultural analysis.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, some cultural theorists argue that the pendulum had, by the late 1980s, swung too far in the direction of non-critical evaluation of culture, excising an important quality from the field. For example, Simon Frith argues that

partly as an effect of the depoliticizing of cultural studies as they enter the humanities curriculum, a new argument has emerged: if it's popular it must be good! I could point to specific examples of this approach – the Popular Culture Association, the work of John Fiske – but the questions that interest me here are whether a populist approach is the logical conclusion of subculturalism... I fear that... cultural studies will remain rooted in accounts of the consumer, every act of "popular" consumption of excuse for celebration. This is the populist argument against which I want to defend popular culture” (Frith 2006, 588)

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<sup>10</sup> Some examples of this broad approach to cultural studies that were reviewed for, but not directly referenced in, this work are Brecht 1964; Lowenthal 1961; Brecht 1964; Nye 1970; Browne, Fishwick et al. 1972; Brooks 1973; Browne 1973; Gans 1974; Cawelti 1976; Schatz 1981; Cavell 1984; Cavell 1984; Griswold 1987; Buxton 1990; Crane 1994; Docker 1994; Cavell 1996; Hayward 1997; Deming 2005; Hermes 2005; Cawelti 2006; Fiske 2006; Webster 2006; Barry and Thrift 2007; Smulyan 2007. Some of these explicitly take up the propriety of popular culture and entertainment for academic study; others imply it with their chosen topic.

Though I agree with Frith that equating popularity with quality is specious, I do not believe that idea to be part of the works towards which he gestures. Rather, their argument seems to me to be 'if it's popular, it's worth studying', to which I would add 'if it's not popular, it's worth studying'. Douglas Kellner made similar accusations of Fiske, arguing for a return to attention to the "circuits of production" (Kellner 2001, 18), the ways in which audiences are 'produced' by what they consume theorized by Birmingham's Marxist scholars. Again, my sympathies tend to lie with Fiske, not because I see no value in Marxist or otherwise critical appraisals of popular culture, but because I do not agree that those are the only appraisals worth making. Eventually, space must be made for different questions and new answers.

This work might be seen as another brick on the 'populist' side of the debate, since (as discussed above) I have chosen an approach with little 'criticality' to it, in the sense that Frith and Kellner would likely use the term. And though I do not explicitly celebrate superheroes or the aesthetically intense experiences they can elicit as positive, my discussion clearly indicates that I find such experiences powerful and enjoyable myself, and am pleased to find such experiences perhaps being shared by wider audiences. By bringing the autoethnographic perspective to bear on matters of popular culture, I am contributing a new methodology to the field of popular culture scholarship. Though it would doubtless sit poorly with those practitioners interested primarily in critical assessments, it would likewise also appeal to those scholars interested in interpreting the everyday meanings that come to be attributed to and imbricated in popular culture by those who consume it, which, as I have argued, is a growing trend in this area of research.

## Comics Scholarship

Comics scholarship has been a growing field of inquiry for some decades, though it remains mostly concentrated in particular universities in the United States, Europe and the UK. It would be misleading to claim that the following constitutes the entirety of this field of inquiry, but most comics scholarship tends to address comics in terms of one or some of these major themes: identity and identity formation<sup>11</sup> (including special attention to gender<sup>12</sup>, sexuality<sup>13</sup>, race<sup>14</sup> and religion<sup>15</sup>); the history and political economy of comics industries<sup>16</sup>; comics as literature<sup>17</sup>; comic audiences and fan communities.<sup>18</sup> American comics scholarship has tended to consider comics in terms of American society and political history, occasionally focusing on superheroes as new forms of myth-making or including critical examinations of ideological elements of the superhero genre.<sup>19</sup> A small selection of

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<sup>11</sup> For examples in comics scholarship, see Brown 2006; Krueger 2008; Sharkey 2008; Greenblatt 2009; Blake 2010; Malabya and Eshb 2012; Pielak 2012. For examples focused on superheroes, see Bacon-Smith and Yarbrough 1991; Dyson 1994; Dyson 1996; Karaminas 2006; Lewis 2006.

<sup>12</sup> For examples in comics scholarship, see Casey 2006; Baker and Raney 2007; Reed 2008; Darlington 2009; Mitchell 2009; Bramlett 2010; Beckman 2011; Brooker 2011; Condis 2011; Hill 2011; Whaley 2011; Køhlerta 2012; Reid 2012. For examples focused on superheroes, see Adams 1983; Jirousek 1996; Brown 1999.

<sup>13</sup> For example, see Brown 2011; Murray 2011; Petrovic 2011; Petrovic 2011.

<sup>14</sup> For examples in comics scholarship, see Rivers 2008; Cunningham 2010; Gravett 2010; Wegner 2010; Hayton 2012. For examples focused on superheroes, see Brown 1999.

<sup>15</sup> For example, see Lind 2008; Stevens 2010; Richardson 2004.

<sup>16</sup> For examples in comics scholarship, see Lupoff and Thompson 1970; Daniels 1971; Sassienie 1994; Gordon 1998; Wright 2001; Nyberg 2002; Howe 2004; Carlin, Karasik et al. 2005; Gordon, Jancovich et al. 2007; Hajdu 2008; Gabilliet, Beaty et al. 2010; Gray 2010; Meyer 2012. For examples focused on superheroes, see Feiffer 1965; Lee 1974; Lee 1975; Jacobs and Jones 1985; Boichel 1991; Meehan 1991; Pearson and Uricchio 1991; Gross 2002; Howe 2004; Jones 2004; Brooker 2005; Morrison 2011. It is important to note that, among the fields of inquiry I review, this one contains the most non-academic works, as many 'industry insiders' have written about this topic. Their contributions, while lacking in academic rigour, are nonetheless important for comics scholarship as a whole, as they provide access to information that might otherwise be unavailable.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see Uricchio and Pearson 1991; Lund 1993; Williams 1999; Klock 2002; Heer and Worcester 2004; Hatfield 2005.

<sup>18</sup> For example, see Harris and Alexander 1998; Pustz 1999; Schelly 2003; Wolf-Meyer 2003; Woo 2012.

<sup>19</sup> For examples in comics scholarship, see Barker 1989; McAllister, Sewell et al. 2001; McAllister, Sewell et al. 2001; Murphy 2008; Finigan 2010; Bolton 2011; Hopkins 2012; Labarre 2012; Meyer 2012; Welhouse 2012. For

international comics scholars have in recent years been pushing the field to broaden its scope by tying interest in comics to other fields of academic inquiry – I discuss some of these further in the next section. The most rapidly-growing area of study, and the one seen by comics scholars as the principal avenue through which the specificity of comics as a ‘legitimate medium’ is being promoted, is the investigation of the form of comics.<sup>20</sup> This involves topics related to the unique mixing of images and text achieved in comics, focusing on matters such as how comic pages are constructed, the usage of panels and the spaces between them, the use of perspective in art, different kinds of narration devices (dialogue balloons, thought balloons, caption boxes, onomatopoeic sound-effects, etc.) and so on.

Scott Bukatman’s works on comics and superheroes (Bukatman 2003; Bukatman 2003; Bukatman 2009) were an early inspiration for me, ranging as they do among discussions of bodies, movement, fashion, architecture, techniques of reading and the politics of identity, all while emoting a ‘fannish’ love of superheroes and comics that is nonetheless balanced by critical engagement with his topics.<sup>21</sup> Iain Thompson’s 2005 article “Deconstructing the Hero” was also hugely influential on this project, thanks to his judicious use of Martin

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examples focused on superheroes, see Mondello 1976; Spigel and Jenkins 1991; Reynolds 1992; Gordon 2001; Jewett and Lawrence 2002; Plumb 2004; Trushell 2004; Hughes 2006; Ndalianis 2009; Griffin 2012. One important exception, in that it focused heavily on ideology but is not an American work, is *How to Read Donald Duck* (Dorfman and Mattelart 1975), a Chilean monograph concerned with the ideological functioning of comics originally created by the Disney corporation and distributed to Chilean children living in the Pinochet regime.

<sup>20</sup> Some examples include Reitberger and Fuchs 1972; Inge 1990; McCloud 1993; Carrier 2000; Magnussen and Christiansen 2000; Kannenburg 2001; Varnum and Gibbons 2001; Cohen 2005; Harvey 2005; Eisner 2006; Eisner 2006; Groensteen 2007; Bartual 2011; Hill 2011; Labarre 2011; Labarre 2011; Pascoal 2011; Pilla 2011; Prevoo 2011; Shaeffer 2011; Teiwes 2011; Labarre 2012. For examples focused on superheroes, see Eco 2004 and Walton 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Of the writers I discuss in this section, it is likely Bukatman’s intellectual approach and writing style has influenced me the most. I find his work the most enjoyable to read and, as a sociologist with an established career supporting effective and engaging pedagogy in academic, accessibility of the speaker/text/ideas and engagement of the audience are of paramount importance to me. I see far less value in excellent ideas presented poorly than in good ideas presented thoughtfully (which is not to say that Bukatman’s ideas are not excellent).

Heidegger's difficult concept 'the uncanny' in deconstructing the deconstruction-work done in one of the most important superhero comics, *Watchmen* (Thompson 2005). Other works of varying themes but similar approach and style did not end up cited directly in my text, but nonetheless provided inspiration and guidance in my own efforts to construct my own analysis. For example, though I found no way to invoke Jim Collins' analysis of the 'hyper-conscious' understanding that fans of popular culture accrue over decades of involvement in – not just exposure to – popular culture, I found his concept 'knowledge encrustations', bits of unrelated, sometimes contradictory knowledge consumers collect and sometimes synthesize into new cultural forms, highly informative and engaging (Collins 1991). In the same collected volume Patrick Parsons provides what begins as a straight quantitative review of changes in comic-book reading populations since the 1950s, but is then used to make insightful interpretations regarding the ways in which those audiences have, over time, impacted the products with which they engage, thereby disrupting the traditional producer/consumer dialectical understanding of cultural production (Parsons 1991). In his authoritative 'cultural history of American comic books', French comics scholar Jean-Paul Gabilliet provides perhaps the most wide-ranging analysis of the industry, mixing exhaustive research into publication and sales histories of, among other kinds, superhero comics, with theoretically-sophisticated analyses of the contents of those comics and the ways in which publishers and readers impacted the medium (Gabilliet, Beaty et al. 2010).

It has taken me some time, but I have come to realize that what attracted me to these and other works<sup>22</sup> was the willingness on the part of authors to engage in some kind of personal interpretation of their chosen topic, as opposed to more traditional, less personal forms of scholarly writing. Here, I am following the work of Harry Wolcott who, as I discuss in chapter one, proposes that interpretation “is a less traditional, more ‘artistic’ form of social science than either analysis or description (Wolcott 1994).”<sup>23</sup> My experience of comics scholarship may be similar to that of Bart Beaty who, in his 2004 review “Assessing Contemporary Comics scholarship,” presents somewhat sharp criticism of four recent monographs, which he assesses according to his high hopes for comics scholarship:

[t]he celebration of comics – or any aspect of culture – has its place in our society. Nonetheless, the place of scholarship is not to celebrate, but to interrogate. It is not enough that books are now being written about comics. Nor will it be enough that good books be written about comics (although that would be nice). Rather, it is incumbent on scholars of this medium to bring to light submerged insights into culture generally that the specific form of comics illuminate (Beaty 2004, 408)

Beaty contrasts ‘interrogation’ with ‘celebration’, indicating that, in his use, the former phrase carries with it a critical edge that the latter does not. This, in conjunction with his assertion that it is the route through which scholars may raise ‘submerged insights’ illuminated by comics, indicates to me that, for Beaty, interrogation is an analytic exercise: comics are the ‘data’ which, upon subject to interrogation, may yield new insights. I have no quarrel with this formulation, and yet my entirely subjective attitude – based on my entirely

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<sup>22</sup> Other works of comics scholarship that also excited and inspired me are Collins 1991; Parsons 1991; Sarchett 2006; Beaty 2007; Denison 2007; Meskin 2007; Gabilliet, Beaty et al. 2010; Schott 2010; Beaty 2012; Wilkins 2012.

<sup>23</sup> That is not to say that, within comics scholarship, the texts just discussed are the only ones to engage in interpretation or other, non-traditional forms of scholarship; only that it is these texts that I found most engaging.

subjective experiences as a graduate student – is that the most interesting insights usually come from, and are presented in light of, interpretation, rather than analysis, on the part of an author. The distinction is a fuzzy one that I return to in some detail in chapter one; but I can offer some potential clarification here. It seems to me that the emphasis of ‘interrogation’ is on the object of study – that is, on the ‘data’ collected and analyzed by a scholar. While this formulation leaves room for the particular contribution of that scholar, she – the ‘knowing subject’ – is implicitly secondary to the object within the interrogative process.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, the emphasis of ‘interpretation’ is on the scholar, on the knowing subject, who is bringing something of herself to the data in a manner more explicit, more forceful, somehow ‘more’, than in interrogation. What this means for me in a practical sense is that the interpretive author is willing to step farther away from the ‘data’, take more risks with the ideas, questions and conclusions they are willing to come to, than the interrogative author. Indeed, in some cases – as I explain in chapter one – the author may even be willing to (autoethnographically) consider herself as the data, and thereby completely eschew the traditional subject/object divide. But even without going so far, the works I enjoy reading are those in which the author seems to bring more of herself out in the text, in the sense of, for example, speaking about personal experiences and the ways in which those have led to new understanding of matters beyond themselves. That is the kind of reasoning I read in, for example, Scott Bukatman’s work, and that is the kind of work I have tried to produce here. Though this was not Beaty’s intended meaning, I hope that by

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<sup>24</sup> As I elaborate in chapter one, the separation presumed between subject and object is entirely in accordance with traditional scientific norms, the ‘family’ to which analysis, and therefore interrogation as I understand it, belong.

introducing the methodological and theoretical principles of autoethnography to the field of comics studies, this work might contribute to continued interesting work in the field as it matures by suggesting ways in which comics scholarship can be personal, subjective, even 'fannish', and yet remain more than celebratory.

## **Superhero: genre and figure**

Before moving into the body of this work, I use the remainder of this introduction to define one of the key concepts of this work: the superhero.

### **Genre**

Having been born largely out of the minds of young science-fiction fans in the 1940s<sup>25</sup>, superhero stories have been largely considered as populist blendings of classical mythologies and science-fiction (advanced technology, alien worlds, space exploration), along with fragments of other established genres such as fantasy (magic or otherwise unexplainable forces and abilities), romance (mawkish and trite flirtations), adventure (heroic tales), pulps and westerns (lone, usually male figures at odds with their surroundings). Though this view is correct inasmuch as any genre can be shown to have antecedents in the works of other genres, I find it lacking and unable fully to capture the specificity of the superhero genre or its central signifier, the superhero.

Daniel Chandler (Chandler 2000, 41-2) asserts that 'genre' is a controversial and fluid concept, but identifies the largest categories of genre as poetry, prose and drama (or theatre),

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<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the best known example of this trend is Jerry Siegel who, along with Joe Shuster, created Superman after having been an avid science-fiction reader for many years (Jones 2004).

distinguished most broadly for being distinct forms of communication. The next subdivision of genre, into content-based categories such as comedy and drama, is also widely agreed upon. Beyond this level, however, Chandler finds little if any agreement on just what genre (or a genre) is:

there is often considerable theoretical disagreement about the definition of specific genres. 'A genre is ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world,' notes Jane Feuer. One theorist's genre may be another's sub-genre or even super-genre (and indeed what is technique, style, mode, formula or thematic grouping to one may be treated as a genre by another (Chandler 2000, 2)

I am not concerned to distinguish genres from sub-genres, nor does that seem relevant to my argument in this work. As a result I refer to superhero stories as both a genre and part of the melodramatic genre.

Peter Coogan (2006) makes an extended argument that superhero stories have come to formulate their own genre. Relying on parameters laid out by Thomas Schatz in an earlier work on film genres, Coogan argues that superheroes satisfy the three basic requirements of a genre. Two easily recognizable characteristics of a genre are instances of imitation and/or parody, and Coogan has no trouble identifying just several of the hundreds of such occurrences that permeate the superhero's history. Superheroes have been parodied in every medium, beginning with the comic form and moving, perhaps most successfully, into the magazine form with the early and regular parodies found in *Mad Magazine* and similar publications. Some would point to the 1960s *Batman* television program as a parody of the genre, and the 2008 movie *Superhero Movie* is nothing but a (poor) attempt to poke fun at the recent deluge of superhero films. In short, there can be no doubt that superheroes have been both imitated and parodied.

Finally, superhero stories are a genre because they have a "specific grammar or system of rules of expression and construction", which operate to provide a "range of expression" for its producers and range of experience for its consumers (Coogan 2006, 25). Coogan is of course correct that superhero stories are built upon formulas and tropes, particularly the basic, but by no means only, formula story featuring an attack by a villain on the status-quo, intervention by the hero which results in struggle (usually physical), the hero's victory and reestablishment of the status-quo. Coogan's interest, which mirrors my own, is to investigate the possibilities within, and the appeal of, the particular experiences derived from consumption of superhero stories. This may be why Coogan deploys only part of Schatz's theory of genre, focusing on the benchmarks useful for identifying genres and ignoring Schatz's statement that "a genre film... involves familiar, essentially one-dimensional characters acting out a predictable story pattern within a familiar setting" (Coogan 2006, 6). Perhaps Coogan ignored this statement because of its derogatory framing of genre. I raise it in order to acknowledge and dismiss Schatz's use of the term 'genre' as a label for those products that do not measure up to, or qualify as, artistic (as in 'that's a genre movie, not an artistic film'). That is the only usage of the term I reject outright, since one of the presumptions underlying this work (as explored above with reference to the work of Hannah Arendt) is that genre fiction or entertainment is not inherently lesser than 'art', if those labels can even be used in such a manner.

Schatz's benchmarks for genre, adapted by Coogan to superheroes, are but one approach to a concept that is still undergoing intellectual debate. Thus, when I argue that superheroes are part of the melodramatic genre, I do not intend to dispute Coogan's argument that they constitute their own genre. Rather than getting stuck on attempts to nail

down one definition and usage of genre, I am concerned to illustrate the melodramatic character of superheroes and to assert how and why that feature has helped them attain recent mainstream popularity.

Interestingly, Coogan does not seem to provide a definition of the superhero genre, only of the superhero figure itself. I offer this admittedly partial, possibly contentious, definition: the superhero genre normally operates through narratives of conflict, through which the superhero is, first and foremost, confronted by a nemesis in such fashion as to require the use of physical violence and extra-human abilities to achieve resolution. Superhero narratives may also offer a second, internal conflict scenario, through which the superhero must face some moral challenge that tests his understanding of how one ought to act. In addition, the superhero genre normally operates with the following tropes: superhuman abilities, colorful costumes, a secret/dual identity, unusual, exotic or futuristic weaponry and futuristic technology.

## Figure

Superheroes are<sup>26</sup> fictional human beings possessing superhuman abilities by virtue of (a) chemical processes within their bodies (in some cases in automatic response to the normal external environment, in some others as responses provoked by the introduction of foreign material into their bodies), (b) intensive training of normal human capacities to 'peak' (in fact superhuman) levels, (c) the application of magic, or technology advanced enough to

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<sup>26</sup> Definitions of the superhero figure have proliferated widely since the 1940s, and my attempt – intended as descriptive rather than analytical – includes elements from the works of Reynolds (1992), Loeb (2005) and Coogan (2006).

resemble magic, or (d) some combination of these. Superheroes follow a code or set of principles that may or may not be made explicit but which usually involves at least (a) the protection of ‘innocents’, ‘citizens’ or ‘bystanders’, regular people targeted by criminals or inadvertently endangered by them, (b) some notion of justice that sometimes overrides the law but is usually framed within liberal concerns for individual freedoms and the preservation of private property, and (c) a refusal to kill. Superheroes usually maintain and transform between two distinct personae, a ‘civilian’ one in which they dress normally and blend in with the general public, and a superhero persona, represented by “a code name and iconic costume” (Coogan 2006, 280) which is known publically.

Though there are some important exceptions<sup>27</sup>, it is a general rule – indeed, a historically central trope of the genre – that a superhero maintains two distinct personae bridged by some process of visual transformation. Most often indicated by a change in clothing – though some characters, such as the Hulk and Captain Marvel, undergo complete radical physical changes – the transformation is a useful characteristic for distinguishing superheroes from other, similarly fantastical fictional characters. Wizards, vampires (and vampire hunters), ogres, sleuths and even cowboys may all overlap with certain characteristics of the superhero, but none of these maintain as part of their heroic oeuvre a constant separateness of clothing and physical demeanor when using their fantastic abilities.

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<sup>27</sup> The most important exceptions are the members of the Fantastic Four, none of whom have very distinct personas. As I discuss in chapter three, Stan Lee asserts that when he created the Fantastic Four – the first superhero comics published by publisher Marvel Comics – he deliberately excluded costumes from the story because he found them to be a somewhat outdated and useless trope. That innovation did not last long, and the members of the Fantastic Four have had costumes for almost the entirety of their existence. However, their identities have always been completely public, so they remain one exception to my guideline above. I discuss the other important exceptions, anti-heroic characters popularized in the 1980s such as Wolverine and the Punisher, in detail in chapter four..

Whether in a phone booth, a storeroom or openly in public, superheroes are defined at least in part by a visual transformation<sup>28</sup> before the undertaking of superheroic activities.<sup>29</sup>

As with Coogan's definition above, most existing definitions of the superhero consider the costumed persona as the public one, while the civilian persona is referred to as the 'secret identity'. I find the inverse more informative. While the costume and face or mask of the superhero persona are recognizable to the public, it is the superhero's persona, not the civilian's, which remains shrouded. Part of the reason Lois Lane had to pine for Superman was his inscrutability, always flying off immediately after having saved her rather than hanging around, as she always desired. Clark Kent, on the other hand, was, if anything, too well understood by Lois. His identity was no mystery to her or anyone else who knew Clark, and the same applies to every superhero: Spider-Man and Wonder Woman were the secrets maintained by Peter Parker and Diana Prince, not vice-versa. And, as I explore throughout the latter sections of this work, those secrets were one hurdle which had to be overcome before superheroes could attain their current mainstream popularity. As it turns out, secrets are not always conducive to entertaining, modern melodrama.

My definition has focused mostly on the 'super' part of 'superhero'. This is because this dissertation turns much more fundamentally on the distinction of the 'super' from the non-super or everyday, which is a central distinction within the logic of melodrama, than the

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<sup>28</sup> As I discuss in more detail in chapter four, the role and importance of the secret identity in the superhero genre has changed in recent years and this is one of the central factors that has allowed the genre to become superdramatic. I must therefore underline that the secret identity and the visual transformation that normally separates the two identities are different, if linked, tropes of the genre.

<sup>29</sup> As a further side-note, this is one of the strongest arguments in favor of including Dexter Morgan, main character of the television program *Dexter*, in the category of superhero. Morgan is a forensic police expert but also a psychopathic serial-killer who has sworn only to kill other serial-killers. Whenever Dexter engages in serial-killing projects he always wears the same outfit: army pants, a snug long sleeve t-shirt, boots and gloves.

distinction of the heroic from the non-heroic. Certainly, heroism can and does play a role in much melodrama, including the superhero genre. And some comics scholarship has taken up the notion of the superhero in light of other conceptualizations of 'the hero'.<sup>30</sup> Many rely on the work of author Joseph Campbell who seems to have penned the foundational text on the topic of heroes, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.<sup>31</sup> One other novel contribution to the understanding of the superhero *qua* heroes comes from Robert Jewett and his concept of the American monomyth (Jewett and Lawrence 1977; Jewett and Lawrence 2002), a robust mapping of superheroes and other heroic figures from American culture, such as the cowboy, onto American conceptions of justice, religion, modernity and global relations. These works are part of an interesting and ongoing line of thinking about superheroes, but it is not a line I take up here because neither the superhero's heroic nature nor the philosophical pursuit of a definition of heroism are central to my argument. Instead, I focus on other tropes of the superhero genre, such as melodrama, physical action and aesthetic intensity to advance my argument.

## Chapter Overview

As stated above, my main claim is that aesthetic intensity is a characteristic that can be attributed to the superhero genre, and that it has intensified since around 2000, thanks to more serialized and melodramatic stories. Though my central claim concerns aesthetic

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<sup>30</sup> Some examples include (Feiffer 1965) (Perry and Aldridge 1967) (French and Pena 1991) (Adkinson 2005) (Loeb and Morris 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Examples of comic scholarship relying on Campbell's work are (Klock 2002; Coogan 2006; O'Rourke and Rodrigues 2007; Wandtke 2007; De Tora 2009; Lodge 2009).

intensity, I find that claim difficult to mobilize, let alone defend, without having put into place my arguments regarding seriality and melodrama. Therefore, this dissertation takes the somewhat unusual approach of presenting my main claim at the end, after I have worked through the supporting arguments.

In chapter one I provide an overview of the methodological approach I adopt in this dissertation. The purpose of this chapter is to lay the groundwork for my methodological approach and make a claim for the kind of evidence I use. Chapter two is the point of entry for my research problem, the first stage of this dissertation. I demonstrate that comic book sales have dropped and that superhero films, though highly profitable, may not be more popular since 2000 than prior to that year. I contrast this material reality with my subjective impression of increased superhero popularity since 2000 and establish autoethnographically that my impression was actually one of superhero proliferation into new cultural spaces, some of which I discuss.<sup>32</sup> Chapter three begins the second stage of this dissertation, in which I argue that particular changes that occurred within the superhero genre over decades contributed to its proliferation. I highlight the changing roles of iteration and seriality

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<sup>32</sup> I focus on comics, films, television programs and advertisements, though the category of 'superhero products' is in fact much wider and includes such artifacts as toys, games, video games, costumes, branded clothing, branded undergarments, school supplies, posters, paintings, novels, magazines, statues and homeware/cookware. There is also an interesting, recent development of texts explicitly discussing superheroes that is categorically not comics scholarship. I refer to this literature as 'superheroes are like...', and its chief characteristic is using superhero tropes and stories as metaphors to explain or discuss topics as far-ranging as philosophy, fashion, weight gain, self-esteem and cooking (see (Fingerroth 2004; Barris 2005; Hanley 2005; Kakalios 2005; Loeb and Morris 2005; McLaughlin 2005; McLaughlin 2005; Morris and Morris 2005; Waid 2005; Kalush and Sloman 2006; Rosenberg 2008; Spivey and Knowlton 2008)). This work tends not to be academic in nature, dealing instead with popular topics, usually in humorous fashion. I chose to focus on the superhero products that seem to me to do the most work of mobilizing superdrama. However, it could certainly be argued that novels and video games about superheroes include superdrama almost or as much as the three media I focus on, especially in recent years, and I discuss this in the Conclusion.

throughout the history of superhero stories, and identify the ways in which those changes increased the potential for melodrama within the genre. In chapters four and five I discuss melodrama in further depth, beginning with some of the ways in which it has been theorized in academia. I then turn to review the changing place and nature of melodrama within superhero stories since their earliest days, referring to superhero appearances in comics and then, more recently, television and film. Across both chapters I demonstrate how, over decades of existence, the superhero genre grew not only more melodramatic but also embraced a new form of melodrama popular in other media and genres, which I call modern melodrama. In the final chapter I explain 'aesthetic intensity' as conceived by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, and do theoretical work to stretch the concept to apply it to the case of superhero entertainment. I provide examples of aesthetic intensity as mobilized by the superhero genre across different media. I then elaborate the specificity of 'superdrama' by linking the aesthetic intensity of some modern superhero products with their simultaneous deployment of modern melodrama, arguing that the combination of aesthetic intensity and modern melodrama allow for superdrama. The conclusion offers a review of my thesis, summarizes my arguments and suggests possible avenues for further work.

# 1 Autoethnography

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In this chapter I discuss autoethnography, the sociological tradition in which I situate my claim that aesthetic intensity is a characteristic that can be attributed to the superhero genre. Autoethnography is an emergent tradition that is currently transforming contemporary sociology, not to mention the social sciences writ large, by legitimating the author's personal experiences as fertile ground for scholarly analysis. In this chapter, I review the historical development of autoethnography, along with its underlying theoretical principles, its suite of methodological guidelines, its points of contention and critique, and some responses to those critiques. I use this foundation to explain how my argument both adopts an autoethnographic orientation and establishes some distance from the tradition. This dissertation lays claim to autoethnography in that it is an interpretive work that locates much of its evidence within the subjective experience of superheroes – namely my own – and is written in a voice intended to engage, evoke sensations from and open dialogue with friendly readers about the aesthetic intensity of superheroes (rather than 'proving' my idea as the single, 'correct' one).

## **The Historical Development of Autoethnography**

Autoethnography is a growing field of social science inquiry premised on the belief that useful and interesting understandings of social reality can be derived from analytic and interpretive attention to the experiences of the author. Autoethnography positions interpretation (of experience and understanding) and reflexivity (self-attention on the part of the author) as useful, fruitful avenues of investigation of social reality. Social reality, in this

view, is understood as the connections and relationships among individuals, the ways in which they understand those connections and the understandings of those connections that sociological investigation can draw out, as well as the larger 'social forces' – such as but not limited to cultural, economic, and political contexts – into which the connections among individuals are inserted and develop.

Autoethnography is characterized by adherents and critics alike as a postmodern form of ethnography.<sup>33</sup> Its general characteristics include a mistrust of grand narrative, a desire to seek alternatives to traditional methods, theories and epistemologies and a belief that power-struggles and politics are at the root of most claims of 'truth', 'objectivity', or 'reality'. Deborah Reed-Danahay positions contemporary autoethnography "at the intersection of three genres of writing which are becoming increasingly visible," those being native anthropology, ethnic autobiography and, most similar to autoethnography, "autobiographical ethnography, in which anthropologists inject personal experience into ethnographic writing" (Reed-Danahay 1997, 4). Though, as I will show, others provide different summaries of the antecedents of autoethnography, this resume points to the central, universal characteristic(s) of the genre: theoretical, methodological and stylistic attention to the author. Though the ways and degree to which this happens vary greatly across autoethnographers, all autoethnography works in this way since, as Holt puts it, all "autoethnographers have

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<sup>33</sup> The term postmodern itself has never been uncontroversial, due not only to disagreement over what 'it' is but also for its implication of a 'modern' period that supposedly ended immediately before its birth. I have known the postmodern turn in theories of the social sciences and humanities to be referred to by many names, some of which include the post-structuralist turn, the post-colonialist turn, the post-positivist turn, the cultural turn, the interpretive turn, the anti-foundational turn and the linguistic turn.

challenged accepted views about silent authorship, where the researcher's voice is not included in the presentation of findings" (Holt 2003, 19).

## **Ethnography at the 'Postmodern' turn**

Autoethnography is broadly based on an ethnographic orientation. According to autoethnography pioneer Carolyn Ellis, ethnography "refers to a variety of research techniques and procedures associated with the goal of trying to understand the complexities of the social world in which we live and how we go about thinking , acting, and making meaning in our lives. These research practices emphasize getting close to those we study, attempting to see the world through participants' eyes, and conveying the experience in a way faithful to their everyday life" (Ellis 2003, 25, emphasis added).

Ethnography went through a period of disfavor following the postmodern turn, "a period lasting from the 1960s to the mid-1980s when, after earlier years of interest in 'native autobiography' in anthropology, the study of individual lives was submerged and marginal to our discipline" (Reed-Danahay 1997, 2). Previously, anthropological studies were typically carried out through what came to be known as participant observation (Clifford 1986, 11): ethnographic anthropologists visited their target populations, lived among them, and produced reports about them. These reports were governed by "a delicate balance of subjectivity and objectivity. The ethnographer's personal experiences, especially those of participation and empathy, [were] recognized as central to the research process, but [were] firmly restrained by the impersonal standards of observation and 'objective' distance (Clifford 1986, 11). As Paul Atkinson puts it, "the successful researcher" of this early period employed a "cool approach" when in the field, striving to maintain a degree of self-possession, reserve and social distance, and reflecting that same approach when writing after

concluding his fieldwork (Atkinson, Coffey et al. 2003). But by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, faith in both ethnography and this particular tradition of “expository conventions, cracked” under the weight of three emerging trends among the social sciences (Clifford 1986, 11).

On one hand, a new ‘scientism’ emerged when “[i]n the late 1960s... sociology embraced scientific protocols... [such that] the most significant disciplinary initiatives... came from organizational analysts, demographers, specialists of immigration, self-described ‘theoreticians’, economic sociologists, institutional analysts, and mathematical modelers” (Venkatesh 2013, 3). In the context of large-scale studies that were subject to increasingly sophisticated quantitative analysis, ethnography in the form of “participant observation with a small sample—of people, neighborhoods, groups, or organizations... grew less influential” (Venkatesh 2013, 3).

Around the same time, “graduate students championing Marxist anthropology” (Foley 2002, 470) began to make their dissatisfactions with contemporary anthropology known, while many sociologists, particularly in England and Europe, also found new interest in Marxist theory. Many young thinkers of the time “turned to a rich tradition of dissent within Marxism and read German Frankfurt critical theorists, and French neo-Marxists” and turned their backs on ethnographic traditions increasingly judged as colonialist and imperialist (Foley 2002, 470).

Similar political concerns also fueled a different kind of theoretical turn among yet other thinkers, those who embraced ideas falling under the broad umbrella of postmodernism. It is to this third ‘turn’ in the social sciences of that period that autoethnography most directly traces its roots.

If we return to consider Ellis' definition of ethnography, the italicized elements capture the points of concern felt by many postmodernists vis-à-vis ethnography; namely, deep doubts of both the possibility of capturing 'others' understandings of the world, and of the goals of such tasks. Emphasizing the 'postcolonial' label for postmodernism, Douglas Foley recalls that "[i]t became commonplace... to acknowledge that anthropology was founded upon liberal, humanist doctrines of ameliorism, orientalism, colonialism, and racism. The time-honored charge of ethnology to record and theorize cultural diversity was thrown into doubt" (Foley 2002, 471). For much of the 1960s and 70s, 'postmodern academics' viewed qualitative attempts to describe as fundamentally tainted by political motivations to re-interpret, and thereby gain a kind of power over, any object of study. These suspicions remained strong through the early 1980s and, to a lesser degree, persist to this day. But by the 1970s, new kinds of qualitative method, including new forms of ethnography that contained clear seeds of autoethnography, began to emerge.

### **'New' Ethnography: Thick Description and Reflexive Fieldwork**

In 1979, ethnographer David Hayano identified a series of works displaying tendencies to what he called 'auto-ethnography', created by ethnographers who "possess the qualities of often permanent self-identification with a group and full internal membership, as recognized both by themselves and the people of whom they are a part" (Hayano 1979, 100). At this early stage, therefore, 'auto-ethnographers' were not yet subjecting their own personal experiences to analysis, as do contemporary autoethnographers. Rather, the label was intended to distinguish an emerging group of "ethnographers who have studied their own... group... [or] certain subcultural, recreational, or occupational groups" (Hayano 1979, 100),

from traditional ethnographies that focused on 'third world' or otherwise 'foreign' populations.

Apart from Hayano's work, other changes were taking place in the social sciences broadly, and in anthropology and ethnography specifically, which also played contributory roles in the eventual emergence of autoethnography. Among ethnographers, Clifford Geertz's essay, "Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" (Geertz 1972), is widely seen as a "brilliant narrative [that] marks the beginning of the 'interpretive turn' in symbolic anthropology" (Goodall 2008, 33). In the essay, Geertz engages in what he termed 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of cockfights in Bali. Thick description allowed Geertz, first, to tell colorful, engaging stories about particular cockfighting events he witnessed, and, second, to theorize the meaning and importance of cockfighting among Balinese men who engaged in the 'sport' despite its illegal status. As Geertz explained in his seminal monograph *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), "[t]he concept of culture I espouse... is essentially a semiotic one... and [my] analysis [is] therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning," which, in turn, meant that "what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to... Right down at the factual base, the hard rock, insofar as there is any, of the whole enterprise, we are already explicating; and worse, explicating explications" (Geertz 1973, 5-9). Geertz eschewed the 'modernist' certainty of scientific method, electing instead to consider the data he selected, as well as his own understandings and dependent analyses, as 'constructions'. Though Geertz was not an autoethnographer (and, indeed, later disparaged autoethnography as "author saturated texts" (Anderson 2006, 385), his work opened the door for many anthropologists to the possibilities of returning to 'participant observation' with new,

interpretivist goals that were more commensurate with postmodern sensibilities than was traditional ethnography. That 'opening' of ethnography, though upsetting to some, provided important opportunities for ethnographers and, eventually, autoethnographers, to engage in new, revealing kinds of thought.

More broadly around that period, the notion of *reflexivity* was entering the social sciences. Atkinson asserts that "[t]he cultural turn... added new empirical domains [to qualitative research]... Feminism and postmodernism have had significant impact on methodological and empirical work" (Atkinson, Coffey et al. 2003, 5). As Eric Mykhalovskiy elaborates, "feminist postmodernist critiques... called for a more self-reflexive social science" (Mykhalovskiy 1996, 134). Canadian sociologist Andrea Doucet provides the following definition of reflexivity, which also reflects the debt this important concept owes to feminism:

Reflexivity, broadly defined, means reflecting on and understanding our own personal, political, and intellectual biographies as researchers and making explicit our location in relation to our research respondents... there has been an explosion of interest in it in the past decade. This is partly due to the enhanced recognition – as fostered by postmodern, poststructural, feminist, hermeneutic, interpretive and critical discourses – that the knowledges we create are grounded in specific historical, cultural and linguistic contexts (Doucet 2006, 47)

This broad definition does well capturing the complexity and sometimes controversial character of the concept of reflexivity, which was an essential component in the eventual development of autoethnography out of more reflexive forms of ethnography. In general, disagreements about reflexivity tend to revolve around the ways in which, and to what degree, it is legitimate for an author to include 'the self' in her work.

Tsekeris and Katrivesis assert that one important way researchers embrace and engage in reflexivity is by championing "the on-going realizations of life-world activities

over the objectification of social facts and structures. In consequence, social reality is not ontologically or discursively prior; it is continuously ‘achieved’ in the course of our everyday interaction” (Tsekeris and Katrivesis 2008, 8). Ethnographers and other qualitative analysts put this into practice by engaging in research and writing that emphasize the ‘everyday’ realities of those studied *and* the ways those realities are experienced and interpreted by those living them.

As I show below, most criticisms of autoethnography come from ethnographers who reject the autoethnographic choice to turn the author’s analytic gaze on him or herself. What many such critiques acknowledge only implicitly are the theoretical presumptions these two methodologies have in common that many others do not, in particular the presumption that data collected from relatively small groups, and interpretation of that data – not just description or analysis – are valid forms of scholarly inquiry. In his “Editor’s Introduction” to the 2007 *Handbook of Ethnography*, Paul Atkinson, after having spent four pages outlining the different strains of ethnography and expressing doubt toward a goal of simple synthesis or summary of this mode of inquiry, states that “the ethnographic traditions... are grounded in a commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation” (Atkinson 2007, 5). The ethnographic tradition is one focused on small-scale interactions and observations, those achievable by an individual or group of researchers able and willing to interact – or not interact – with those groups whom they can observe. Contrasted with other methods that emphasize distance-based data-collection from large populations, such as survey-collecting, ethnography accepts and promotes a belief that huge numbers of ‘subjects’

are not necessary for useful social science research – it just depends on the questions being asked and the insights being sought out.

Early ethnography, that of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, attempted what is now referred to as positivist research that embraced the notion of a researcher remaining objectively-distanced from and uninvolved with his object(s) of study. Such objectivity is commonly associated with ‘description’, which Harry Wolcott defines as addressing “the question, ‘What is going on here?’” (Wolcott 1994, 12). On a continuum he suggests for qualitative methods, he places description at the ‘safe’ end, in that it can most easily be assessed for factual content and, in that respect, evaluated. Midway on the continuum, Wolcott places ‘analysis’, which at its broadest means “transforming data,” (24) but Wolcott specifies as “the identification of essential features and the systematic description of interrelationships among them – in short, how things work” (12). Analysis is a complex category in that it goes beyond simple description, attempting to draw out something that is not immediately, superficially obvious, even as it “presumes to *be* fact” (25). Analysis, also an accepted part of ethnography since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “suggests something of the scientific mind at work: inherently conservative, careful, systematic” (25). At the other end of the continuum, Wolcott places interpretation, which “addresses processual questions of meanings and contexts: ‘How does it all mean?’ ‘What is to be made of it?’” (12). Interpretation is the least ‘safe’ and most difficult form of ethnographic work to assess through ‘objective’ reference to ‘reality’ because, “associated as it is with meaning, the term interpretation is well suited to mark a threshold in thinking and writing at which the researcher *transcends factual data and cautious analyses and begins to probe into what is to be made of them*” (36, emphasis added). As alluded to above, social science in general began paying

serious analytical attention to meaning-making and the attendant focus on experience(s) during the postmodern turn. For its part, much ethnography since then has sought ways to combine the central methodology of participant observation for purposes of description and analysis, with more attention to the meanings attributed by members of those groups to their social interactions and the social forces they encounter every day. Autoethnography, then, can be seen as one further step along that same direction.

Through the late 1970s and 1980s, reflexivity became relatively standard practice among many ethnographers through a practice widely referred to as ‘the confessional’ (Coffey 1999; Atkinson, Coffey et al. 2003). ‘Confessionals’, also referred to as self-revelatory documents, were spaces where ethnographers could “chronicle the personal journeys of and in fieldwork experiences, the ethnographer's take” (Atkinson, Coffey et al. 2003, 51), a space of “personal revelation [in which] to reveal and restore the self” (Coffey 1999, 117). Going further than the ‘signs’ of an active author implied by the practices of thick description and interpretation, confessionals were understood as ‘safe’ places for authors to make explicit reference to themselves, their experiences and their emotions. The key factor ensuring that safety was that these documents were always presented (published) apart from the researcher’s ‘main’ text, the one in which they maintained the traditional ‘cool perspective’ toward their subject by relying on the omniscient, passive author’s voice without any self-reference (as I have been doing throughout this literature review). This practice – separating the ‘subjective’ confessional writings from the ‘objective’ academic writings – seems to have been considered by many ethnographers of the period to be the ‘correct’ way to do ethnography while adopting some postmodern sensibilities. Autoethnographers, however, emerged as a group who were not satisfied with that separation and sought further

opportunities to escape the traditional subject/object divide of the social sciences, in pursuit of other kinds of understanding about social reality.

## **Autoethnography: theory and method**

In the opening article of a special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (2006) devoted to autoethnography, Leon Anderson says,

Over the past fifteen years, we have seen an impressive growth of research that has been variously referred to as auto-anthropology, autobiographical ethnography or sociology, personal or self-narrative research and writing, and perhaps most commonly, autoethnography. This scholarship has been linked, explicitly and implicitly by different authors, to various “turns” in the social sciences and humanities: the turn toward blurred genres of writing, a heightened self-reflexivity in ethnographic research, an increased focus on emotion in the social sciences, and the postmodern skepticism regarding generalization of knowledge claims (Anderson 2006, 373)

The overview I present now is intended to familiarize the reader with the different strains and styles of work currently captured by the umbrella term ‘autoethnography’.

Contemporary autoethnography is less a singular, coherent model and more a ‘field of play’ in which various researchers engage, in differing ways and degrees, in reflexive interpretation of their experiences in pursuit of broader, social and cultural understanding. Therefore, my review is intended to establish some basic criteria on which autoethnographers agree (to which Anderson has just pointed), but not to synthesize them into one coherent model. That task would not only be unlikely to succeed, but would also go against the spirit of genre’s dedication to poly-vocality.

## **Underlying, ethnographic, theoretical principles**

The theoretical principles underlying autoethnographic method stem from the postmodern sensibilities already discussed, particularly reflexivity. As Laura Ellingson states in an

autoethnographic piece coauthored with Carolyn Ellis, “[a]utoethnography reflexively celebrates and often explicitly integrates processes into the product. Revealing and interrogating the processes of research is critical to autoethnography and counters the historical imperative to obscure the details of the construction of research findings using sanitizing strategies such as passive voice (Ellingson and Ellis 2008, 453).

For decades, ethnographers have embraced the idea that their involvement in those everyday experiences is of significance, but have chosen to explore that in spaces completely separated from their ‘official’ works – that is, in the ‘confessionals’ discussed above.

Autoethnographers, however, take this ontological commitment farther by including their own everyday experiences as part of, sometimes all of, the ethnographic work they are performing, based on their understanding of the self “not as an individual’s personal and private cognitive structure but as discourse about the self – the performance of languages available in the public sphere... the self as narrative rendered intelligible within ongoing relationships... the self as embedded in cultural meanings (Ellingson and Ellis 2008, 454).

This applies to all selves, not just ‘others’ selves’. As Reed-Danahay puts it, contemporary autoethnography

reflects a changing conception of both the self and society in the late twentieth century. It synthesizes both a postmodern ethnography, in which the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography have been called into question, and a postmodern autobiography, in which the notion of the coherent individual self has been similarly called into question. The term has a double meaning, referring either to the ethnography of one’s own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest (Reed-Danahay 1997, 2)

The specific choice here is not to privilege the author as ‘objective’, as removed from social relations in any way, and so to maintain her susceptibility to the same analytical processes she might apply to others. This is a theoretical choice prompted by political motivations to

eschew traditional forms of social science inquiry; in other words, “engaging in autoethnography acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist” (Ellis, Adams et al. 2011, 3); see also (Skott-Myhre, Weima et al. 2012, xviii).

That personal experience can be usefully examined to make plausible, interesting and engaging inferences about wider cultural and societal realities is one of the theoretical underpinnings of autoethnography. Below, I discuss links between autoethnography and the important sociological works of C. Wright Mills and Pierre Bourdieu. In a relatively early sociological article on “auto/biography” (Stanley 1993), Liz Stanley demonstrates that another ‘founding’ sociologist, Robert K. Merton, also promoted arguments that prefigured the autoethnographic concern for linking biography and social analysis. Stanley quotes the following key passage from Merton:

The sociological biography utilizes sociological perspectives, ideas, concepts, findings and analytical procedures to construct and interpret a narrative text that purports to tell one's own history within the larger history of one's times... autobiographers are the ultimate participants in a dual participant-observer role, having privileged access - in some cases, monopolistic access - to their own inner experience... full-fledged sociological autobiographers relate their intellectual development both to changing social and cognitive micro-environments close at hand and to the encompassing macro-environments provided by the larger society (Stanley 1993, 43)

Like all of the autoethnographers I refer to here, Merton is pointing out that writing biography does not limit one to telling an individual's story, because every individual is part of, influencing and influenced by, larger social groups and structures that inevitably leave ‘telltale traces’ on them. Merton, Mills and Bourdieu each pursued that belief in different ways and in ways that were not always like autoethnography; but there exists a common thread nonetheless, the belief that “there is no need to individualize, to de-socialize, the ‘individual’, because from one person we can recover social processes and social structure,

networks, social change and so forth, for people are located in a social and cultural environment which constructs and shapes not only what we see but also how we see it” (Stanley 1993, 45). Or, as Mykhalovskiy describes his autoethnographic aspirations, “what I hoped to accomplish was to show that to write individual experience is, at the same time, to write social experience” since his autoethnography, “[l]ike other works of autobiographical sociology... takes as its object, the social processes through which subjectivities are formed” (Mykhalovskiy 1996, 141-42). Ellis, in particular, mobilizes arguments supporting self-analysis by the author, which is her primary mode of autoethnographic writing. One central way she sees autoethnography produced is “[w]hen researchers... retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity (Ellis, Adams et al. 2011, 8). Like Merton, Ellis highlights the uniqueness of data collected by ‘insiders’ and sees no reason to dismiss that data out of fear of self-indulgence. And like Merton, she notes in particular the kind of data that can be collected by an insider who also has specialized training: “What makes your story more valid is that you are a researcher. You have a set of theoretical and methodological tools and a research literature to use” (Ellis, Adams et al. 2011, 8). This part of the argument is important to this dissertation, and I return to it below when discussing my use of autoethnographic principles.

Ellis articulates one key difference between much autoethnography and most other forms of ethnography and social science in general: “Instead of being obsessively focused on questions of how we know, which inevitably leads to a preference for analysis and generalization, autoethnography centers attention on how we should live and brings us into lived experiences in a feeling and embodied way” (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 439). Whether

one agrees with her characterization of non-autoethnographic social science or not, Ellis' assertion of the political goals of much autoethnographic writing is clearly embodied in the ways in which autoethnography tends to be written. It is to those modes of execution of autoethnography I now turn.

## **Autoethnographic methods**

Laura Ellingson asserts that “qualitative research can be productively thought of as existing along a continuum. Artistic interpretivists anchor one end, whereas scientific positivists hold down the other” (Ellingson and Ellis 2008, 445). Though researchers who do not practice autoethnography would likely lump the entire genre far toward the ‘artistic’ end of the ‘social science’ continuum, since it always includes some degree of interpretation, it is nevertheless possible to differentiate strains of autoethnography by following through Ellingson’s suggestion.

In 2003, Carolyn Ellis provided the following schematic of the autoethnographic form: “Usually written in the first-person voice, autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms – short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, scripts, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. They showcase concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness (Ellis 2003, 39). In a more recent article, Ellis and two colleagues reviewed nine distinct forms of autoethnographic practice that, according to the authors, “differ in how much emphasis is placed on the study of others, the researcher’s self and interaction with others, traditional analysis, and the interview context, as well as on power relationships” (Ellis, Adams et al. 2011, 14) These nine are presented here in order of decreasing commitment to ‘traditional’ forms of analysis, meaning they slide from the ‘science end’ to the ‘art end’ of Ellingson’s art-

science continuum: *indigenous ethnographies* follow the style of traditional ethnographies, but are written by “colonized or economically subordinated people” rather than an “(outside) researcher,” allowing these “indigenous/ native ethnographers... to construct their own personal and cultural stories”; *narrative ethnographies* are other-oriented ethnographies that are non-traditional in that they “incorporate the ethnographer’s experiences” and that fieldwork and analysis are presented “in the form of stories... [where] the narrative often interests with analyses of patterns and processes”; *reflexive didactic interviews* are similar in that they focus on others while including reference to the experiences of the author, though in this case fieldwork and data-presentation take the form of interviews with participants; *interactive interviews* step farther away from traditional forms of scholarship in that the interviews are intended more fully to draw out and probe the interviewer’s thoughts as well as the participants’, the idea being to focus on the result of social interaction rather than isolation; *community autoethnographies* place the autoethnographer within the context of a larger community in which they fully participate, with the goal of examining issues facing the entire community as represented by the experiences of all its members; *co-constructed narratives* take us farther toward the ‘art end’ of the continuum, since they are focused entirely on the authors – but, since this kind of autoethnography always involves at least two authors working in collaboration to explore meanings and understanding, there remains some element of ‘other’ in this approach; *reflexive ethnographies*, however, take the final necessary step of ‘auto’ethnography by reflexively focusing entirely on the sole author of that piece, in this case with the goal of chronicling their fieldwork experiences and the personal changes that resulted (these resemble the ‘confessionals’ discussed above, but are not considered ‘separate’ from the ‘true’ documents as were confessionals); *layered accounts*

proceed in similar manner but with a different goal, presenting the author's experience alongside data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature in order to illustrate how “data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously” and frame existing research as a “source of questions and comparisons” rather than a “measure of truth”; finally, what Ellis et al call *personal narratives* are the “most controversial forms of autoethnography for traditional social scientists, especially if they are not accompanied by more traditional analysis and/or connections to scholarly literature, as they are

stories about authors who view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative narratives specifically focused on their academic, research, and personal lives... Personal narratives propose to understand a self or some aspect of a life as it intersects with a cultural context, connect to other participants as co-researchers, and invite readers to enter the author's world and to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives (24)

With this nine-point overview of autoethnography, Ellis et al have constructed the most elaborate sketch of the field that is currently available – though that is about to change, when a 700-plus page *Handbook of Autoethnography* (co-edited by Ellis) is released in late March, 2013 (Jones, Adams et al. 2013). For the moment, this nine-point model best describes the varieties of ways in which researchers currently undertake autoethnography. It should be noted that many, if not most, autoethnographic works do not fit cleanly into any one of these categories; rather, any single work will tend to include elements from several categories. This tends to be especially true for those authors working closer to the ‘art end’ of the autoethnographic continuum, who are most likely to mix ‘other-oriented’ work with ‘self-oriented’ work.

There are a few other labels for autoethnographic work that bear mention, as well as a few research-areas in which autoethnography overlaps with sociology that I review briefly. Foley (2002) and Sparkes (2002) emphasize the creative aspect and powerful emotional

content of much autoethnography by using the labels “heartfelt” (Foley 2002, 474) and “heartful” (Sparkes 2002, 211, emphasis in original). Being reflexive, Foley sees his autoethnographic works as possessing the necessary characteristic of “openly subjective... [seeking] to undermine grandiose authorial claims of speaking in a rational, value free, objective, universalizing voice. From this perspective, the author is a living, contradictory, vulnerable, evolving multiple self, who speaks in a partial, subjective, culture-bound voice” (Foley 2002, 474). However, he goes on to describe his own autoethnography continuum, with Ellis’ “heartfelt, intensely personal study of her relationship with a dying loved one” on one end, and his own “broad, less intimate community study of White/Indian race relations in my hometown” on the other. Sparkes does not contribute any ‘minimum characteristics’ for inclusion in the autoethnographic category or a continuum of his own. Rather, as someone who practices heartful autoethnography, he provides this extensive list of its characteristics:

the use of systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall; the inclusion of the researcher's vulnerable selves, emotions, body and spirit; the production of evocative stories that create the effect of reality; the celebration of concrete experience and intimate detail; the examination of how human experience is endowed with meaning; a concern with moral, ethical, and political consequences; an encouragement of compassion and empathy; a focus on helping us know how to live and cope; the featuring of multiple voices and the repositioning of readers and 'subjects' as co-participants in dialogue; the seeking of a fusion between social science and literature; the connecting of the practices of social science with the living of life; and the representation of lived experience using a variety of genres - short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essay, journals, fragmented and layered writing and social science prose (Sparkes 2002, 211)

This list brings up an important aspect of autoethnography not covered by Ellis’ nine-point model: that it sometimes goes beyond ‘narrative’, to take the form of ‘poetry... photographic essays, personal essay, journals’, forms and media not at all within traditional scholastic frameworks for such usage.

What this review has hopefully made clear is that, rather than a singular methodology, autoethnography is really an umbrella term for a broad, sometimes disparate set of methodological imperatives. However, as I have outlined and discuss further below, those imperatives are linked not only by common underlying theoretical principles, but by similar political motivations. As Worth points out, “traditional forms of knowledge (knowing *how* and knowing *that*) are not sufficient to cover a third kind of knowledge (knowing what *it is like*) in the way storytelling can” (Worth 2005, 14).

### **Links to sociology**

Autoethnography has theoretical and/or methodological similarities to three varieties of, or themes within, sociology that are not themselves explicitly ethnographic. Game and Metcalfe have advanced the idea of *Passionate Sociology* (1996), which shares both theoretical and methodological affinities with autoethnography. Passionate sociology is “a sociology concerned with the sharp and specific experiences of life; not seeking to dissolve these experiences in the pursuit of idealized abstraction, it wants to *feel* them, to be on the edge. An engaged or passionate sociology involves a sensual and full-bodied approach to knowing” (Game and Metcalfe 1996, 5). Like autoethnography, passionate sociology adopts a postmodern sensibility by arguing that the author’s self is partially constructed in the process of representing itself: [w]hile representing the self implies a pre-given self that is expressed in the writing, *writing* involves a becoming of the self, a making of the self that is not already all of a piece, but, rather, is in process (Game and Metcalfe 1996, 103). An author, therefore, can neither presume to take an objective stance vis-à-vis her object of attention, nor remove herself from her account of that object, both of which are norms of traditional scholarly work:

If sociological writing is a form that denies itself, there are, nevertheless, rules for this writing, codes for clear scientific writing. ... Even if not made explicit, the rules of sociological writing usually require a 'neutral', non-literary form that denies that form constitutes meaning. And yet this is itself an acknowledgement that form is implicated in meaning, for literary forms are rejected on the assumption that they will constitute non-sociological meanings. ... The central point here is that science's genre of transparent writing constitutes social reality in a particular way as, for example, consisting of facts. It also constitutes the relation between itself and that reality in a particular way – as a relation of separation, distance (93)

Passionate sociology could be considered one example of the sociology of emotions, but unlike much work in that field, Game and Metcalfe go further than talking about emotions in standard, academic fashion. Instead they rely on many of the same methodological tools employed by autoethnographers, such as narratives of personal experience heavily colored by descriptive, colorful and decidedly non-academic prose. They do this with the hope that [b]y practicing a passionate sociology” throughout the text and thereby “offering a passionate sociological account of sociology, we hope to inspire readers to participate in creative processes that sharpen and deepen experience” (5). In this way, their goal is also the same as that of many autoethnographers – to engage readers beyond the ways of which traditional academic writing may be capable, with its emphasis on rational explanation and a passive, omniscient voice.

Another kind of sociology similar to autoethnography stems from Andrew Abbot’s work on lyrical sociology. Lyrical sociology is qualitative and considered by Abbot to be a methodology of social science and ethnography that features the author prominently, but he does not refer to it as autoethnography (2007). This may be because autoethnography is widely, if not universally, considered by its practitioners to be one form of *narrative ethnography* – as discussed above, it is widely practiced via storytelling – whereas for Abbot the central goal is to “imagine a kind of sociology – really a kind of social science – that is in

some profound sense *not narrative*... its ultimate, framing structure should not be the telling of a story – recounting, explaining, comprehending – but rather the use of a single image to communicate a mood, an emotional sense of social reality (Abbott 2007, 73). Abbot's argument for positioning lyrical sociology against narrative sociology stems from his ontology of the experience of time by humans. Abbot states that “[l]yrical sociology embodies one of two possible approaches to temporality in social analysis” (90), and then asserts that “[t]ensed time is what we live; ordered time is what we narrate. The one is subjective and indexical; the other is objective and iconic” (90). Narrative is how we make sense of our experiences, not just in the social sciences but as human beings more generally. Abbot argues that some social science, history and historical sociology in particular, are “concerned with causes and typical sequences of events, matters that are inherently narrative,” and therefore a “narrative writer seeks to tell us what happened and perhaps to explain it” (73). This drive to ‘explain’ through the positioning of events in causal relationships is not erroneous in Abbot's view, but accounts only for ‘ordered’ time, time that has been retroactively given meaning through analysis, and ignores ‘tensed’ time, time as it is experienced. In Abbot's view, a researcher can, however,

*make a choice* whether to view the present narratively or instantaneously; whether it is a step in a longer story or a moment in itself. Neither step absolutely denies the truth, and each has its own pathology... Those who believe in 'larger forces' have their 'structure and agency' problem (which in effect is about the present's independence to be for itself and not simply an instantiation of some larger process) while the 'presentists' have the problem of explaining social change in a world they have deliberately conceived as instantaneous (91, emphasis added)

The lyrical sociologist, who is one kind of ‘presentist’, eschews narrative – and therefore explanation – for a different method and goal. Arguing again that narrative writers want to

relate what has happened and, ultimately, explain it, Abbot sees the goal of the lyrical writer as telling readers

of his or her intense reaction to some portion of the social process seen in a moment. This means that the first will tell us about sequences of events while the second will give us congeries of images. It means that the first will try to show reality by abstract mimesis while the second will try to make us feel reality through concrete emotions... lyrical writing centers on an image or images. These are viewed in different ways, through different lenses, to evoke the sources of the writer's emotional reaction (76)

In other words, “[t]he lyrical is momentary... It is not about something happening. It is not about an outcome. It is about something that is, a state of being” (75). In this manner, lyrical sociology is one attempt to bring to social science a means of representing and conveying tensed, rather than ordered time, so as to, as quoted above, communicate something of the emotional aspect of human involvement in social reality.

Finally, autoethnography shares affinities with a text that is widely considered foundational to modern, north-American sociology, C. Wright Mills’ *The Sociological Imagination*. *The Sociological Imagination* (1959/2000) is unlike most of the ‘great’ texts typically discussed in Introduction to Sociology courses, in that it dates from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its author was American and not European, and it is eminently readable without extensive knowledge of the political history or religious traditions of Europe. It is also relatively slim and, for the most part, maintains a very positive and encouraging tone regarding sociology and the “task and promise” of the sociological imagination, which “enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society” (Mills 2000, 6). Mills does not follow, or suggest that others follow, the autoethnographer’s methodological approach of foregrounding the author’s experiences. However, Mills establishes strong theoretical underpinnings that parallel those of autoethnography, through arguments such as the following:

The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. ... The first fruit of this imagination - and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it - is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own changes in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances.. [The sociological imagination] is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self - and to see the relations between the two.... That, in brief, is why it is by means of the sociological imagination that men now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society (Mills 2000, 5, 7)

The connection in favour of which Mills is arguing, that between the individual and society, seems to me to be the central and most fertile ground on which sociology can operate. Rather than attempting to restrict sociological attention either to 'the macro level' by attempting to understand all only in terms of 'large social structures' or 'forces', or to 'the micro level' by attending only to interpersonal social interactions, sociology seems at its best to me when it is drawing out, demonstrating or even, when necessary, imagining the multiple, myriad and incredibly subtle and powerful ways those interact and impact each other. Reality has no 'levels', and while it may have been and even continue to be fruitful for social science to sometimes proceed as if levels existed in order to highlight one feature or another of reality, sociologists, in particular, must remember that such theoretical parsing is *only* theoretical. Mills' advice to remember to rely on our imagination, on our creativity, to find ways in which analytically to tie the individual to the social points to autoethnography in a number of ways. As a number of authors interested in or practicing autoethnography point out, "autoethnography offers distinctively grounded opportunities to pursue the connections between biography and social structure that are central to C. Wright Mills' conception of the sociological imagination" (Anderson 2006, 390; see also Cook (2012) and Richardson (1990)). Autoethnography is one example of the sociological imagination at work.

## Autoethnography: cutting-edge sociological inquiry

I have traced the origins of autoethnography to the late 1970s. However, its non-traditional, somewhat rebellious emphasis on reflexivity and interpretation kept autoethnography out toward the fringes of social science, rather than affording it wide-spread attention or acceptance. Current indications, however, are that autoethnography was ahead of its time, as, since the mid-2000s, it shows significant signs of gaining new traction among social scientists while it also spreads to new fields of inquiry beside anthropology and sociology.

Delamont, in one of her numerous critiques of autoethnography, points out (with some frustration) that “[s]ince *Composing Ethnography* (Ellis and Bochner 1996) there has been an explosion in autoethnography. Journals such as *Qualitative Inquiry* and *Qualitative Studies in Education* regularly feature autoethnographic papers” (Delamont 2009, 57). She also notes the increasing volume of autoethnographic material in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, which in its first edition in 1994 had just one indexical entry for autoethnography, followed in the second edition (2000) by thirteen entries and a short chapter, and 37 index entries and a dedicated chapter in the third edition (2005). Though the current fourth edition (2011) contains just twelve indexical entries and one chapter, this is likely due to the forthcoming first edition of the *Handbook of Autoethnography* (March, 2013), a 700-page reference volume with contributions from almost fifty practitioners (Jones, Adams et al. 2013). Anderson also emphasizes that while autoethnographic works

remain largely marginalized in mainstream social science venues, due to their rejection of traditional social science values and styles of writing... they have gained entrée into many traditionally realist qualitative-research journals (e.g., *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Symbolic Interaction*, and *Qualitative Sociology*) and have been influential in the creation of newer postmodern-friendly journals (e.g., *Qualitative Inquiry*), handbooks (e.g., Denzin and Lincoln’s *Handbook of Qualitative Inquiry*), and even book series (e.g., the AltaMira Press series on “*Ethnographic Alternatives*”) (Anderson 2006, 377)

Beyond publications focused on either autoethnography or qualitative methods more broadly, autoethnography is also appearing in works focused on post-secondary teaching (Cook 2012); (Ribbens 1993); (Crawley, Curry et al. 2008), education more broadly (Fox 2006; Trahar 2008; Trahar 2009), international relations (Dauphinee 2010) and sports and leisure studies (Denison and Rinehart 2000; Richardson 2000; Sparkes 2000; Tsang 2000). That these studies have begun to emerge across disciplines just within the last five to ten years, indicates a growing acceptance of the value of reflexivity and interpretation in any attempt to understand social reality. Autoethnography seems to be cutting-edge social science.

### **Criticisms of autoethnography**

In *Autoethnography as Method* (2008), a monograph devoted to laying out specific and practical steps for completing autoethnographic studies, Heewon Chang lists five potential traps of which the autoethnographer must be aware: (1) excessive focus on the self in isolation from others; (2) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation; (3) exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source; (4) negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives; and (5) inappropriate application of the label 'autoethnography' (Chang 2008, 54). Through written by an autoethnographer, Chang's list effectively captures all of the areas of critique to which other examples of the genre are typical subjected. That a practitioner of the genre can call what other practitioners do as a matter of course 'traps' indicates the large range of attitudes, ontologies, theoretical principles and methodologies that have been grouped under the label 'autoethnography', which is still very much in the process of sorting itself out in any singular, coherent structure.

Another example that makes this clear is the work of Leon Anderson who, in a special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (August, 2006) devoted to autoethnography, argues that even autoethnographers aren't fully aware of the range of practices making up their chosen field: "current discourse on this genre of research refers almost exclusively to 'evocative autoethnography' that draws upon postmodern sensibilities and whose advocates distance themselves from realist and analytic ethnographic traditions. The dominance of evocative autoethnography has obscured recognition of the compatibility of autoethnographic research with more traditional ethnographic practices" (Anderson 2006, 373). He goes on to propose greater engagement in "analytic autoethnography," which he identifies at work in existing "*realist* ethnographic texts that exemplify the autoethnographic impulse—albeit often only partially" (Anderson 2006, 378). Analytic autoethnography eschews some autoethnographic practices, particularly those that stray from traditional norms of scientific research through methods such as emotional writing – that is, writing that either is fully of emotive language, or focuses intently on the emotions of the author. Instead, Anderson proposes that analytic autoethnography be considered autoethnography based on the following characteristics: (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis (Anderson 2006, 373). Retaining some emphasis on the author's experiences and visibility within her texts, Anderson's formulation, like Chang's, insists on ethnography beyond the self and on analysis which, one imagines, he contrasts with writing that is evocative but perhaps only descriptive.

These formulations of autoethnography by practitioners can usefully be seen as highly sympathetic critiques of the genre interested in changing it to suit more mainstream tastes, rather than abandoning it altogether. Next, I review some of the other, harsher critiques of the genre.

Autoethnography has received criticism mostly from a small circle of authors, a fact I attribute not to its lack of controversial elements, but to its outsider status among social science methodologies. Autoethnography simply has not yet become important enough for those at the 'centre' of social science to take notice of, or make the effort of sustained critical attention toward, the genre. Nonetheless, sustained, developed and effective critiques of autoethnography have been put forward by scholars who are equally invested in other forms of qualitative and ethnographic inquiry.

Paul Atkinson has been one of the most regular and prolific opponents of autobiography. As an ethnographer, Atkinson acknowledges the tradition of including the author's experiences in some way, as when he argues that "[i]f weaving the self into the ethnography is a journey... then autoethnography represents one possible destination. We do not have to travel there in order to acknowledge that the personal self, the ethnographic self, and the author of the self are interwoven in complex ways (Atkinson 1997, 65). In this manner he recognizes tools such as "personalized accounts of fieldwork" and "tales of the naive incompetent, overcoming adversity and difficulty in the quest for data," (63) his interpretation of the 'confessional' project discussed above, through which ethnographers write about their personal challenges, which are then published separately from their 'main' research. What upsets Atkinson is those "authors working in a self-consciously experimental vein have treated authorship as a *personal* matter," (14) such that "the self and

the field become one - ethnography and autobiography are symbiotic” (63). In one of his earlier articles from 2003, in which he characterizes autoethnography as still “experimental,” Atkinson levels the attack that “autoethnography could be accused of producing self-indulgent writings, published under the guise of social research... it is debatable whether utilizing ethnographical strategies to write autobiography really counts as ethnography at all. This may be the case where the only 'field' researched and represented is the self” (65). In other works, Atkinson focuses less on autoethnography’s attention to the author and more on the narrative, non-analytic style of writing employed by many autoethnographers (though not just autoethnographers), arguing correctly that “narrative does not provide a hyperauthentic version of actors' experiences of selves” (Atkinson 1997, 343) and that therefore “the research interview should be examined analytically as a performative act, through which identities are enacted, actions are justified and recounted events are retrospectively constructed” (Atkinson and Delamont 2006, 167). In 2008 he combines both lines of criticism by asserting that the

postmodern turn, we believe, has led to some serious problems... there has been an unhelpful appeal to the *experiential* as a justification for ethnographic fieldwork, in preference to the disciplined examination of order and action. Here 'experience' refers to the experience of the social actors with whom the ethnographer engages, and the experiences of the ethnographer her- or himself. The latter tendency leads to the development of autoethnography as a distinctive genera within the general field... the stress of personal experience and biographically bounded knowledge detracts from the need for sustained analysis of substantive social worlds and social settings (Atkinson, Delamont et al. 2008, 49)

Attention to the self and emphasis on experience, recounted in narrative fashion rather than through traditional analytic style that eschews narrative for the identification of cause-effect relationships, are identified as the main problems of autoethnographic works in which “many of the guiding tenets of social-science research have been all but abandoned” (53). But

Atkinson goes further, attacking not just the work but the attitudes of those engaging in it as so “arrogant [as] to assume that one's own self and one's own emotional responses are more significant than those of others, who are relegated to bit-part, supporting players, while the ethnographer claims center stage... It is unethical, too... in that it distracts away from the otherwise voiceless social actors, the marginal or the muted... [and thus] transforms the ethnographic enterprise into a form of creative writing rather than disciplined and systematic analysis” (52). Autoethnographers are thus narcissistic and unethical for turning their gaze upon themselves, as well as undisciplined and unsystematic for their eschewal of traditional ‘tenets of social science’, in Atkinson’s view.

Sarah Delamont, who occasionally collaborates with Paul Atkinson, differs in that she does endorse and produce “reflexive ethnography, where the scholar is studying a setting, a subculture, an activity or some actors other than herself, and is acutely sensitive to the interrelationship(s) between herself and the focus of the research,” and which she sees as entirely different from “autoethnography where there is no object except the author herself to study” (Delamont 2009, 58). Delamont asserts that “autoethnography cannot meet core social science objectives,” (59) and then supports her assertion through six key arguments. In order not to do violence to her perspective, rather than summarizing her arguments by collapsing her points into thematic categories as I perceive them, I present her six points here almost in their entirety.

- (1) Ethnographic research should, however hard it is for the scholar, make the familiar anthropologically strange (or make the anthropologically strange familiar)... Studying ourselves can never make anything anthropologically strange.
- (2) Autoethnography is almost impossible to write and publish ethically.

(3) Research is supposed to be analytic not merely experiential. Atkinson has argued at some length that autoethnography is all experience, and is noticeably lacking in analytic outcome.

(4) Ethnography is supposed to 'capture and record [experiences of] the powerless and unvoiced'... Autoethnography focuses on people on the wrong side of Becker's (1967) classic question, on those easy to access.

(5) Ethnographers have powerful methods available to them so that unknown social worlds can be studied. Autoethnography focusses on social scientists who are not usually interesting or worth researching. The minutiae of the bodies, families or households of social scientists are not likely to provide analytic insights for social science.

(6) Sitting in offices inside the university contemplating ourselves and our bodies is ethically a problematic interpretation of that obligation. Introspection is not an appropriate substitute for data collection.

So, while Delamont sees a place for reflexivity in ethnography, her critique of autoethnography echoes Atkinson's negative assessment of the scholar's attention on him or herself.

This attitude is also shared by one of sociology's most important ethnomethodologists, French scholar Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's sociology is both ethnomethodological, in that its historical development follows his years spent aboard studying Algerian living habits, customs and actions, and Marxist, in that it asserts the primacy of the economic field over other social forces influencing individuals. However, like many Marxists of his generation, Bourdieu sought to enrich Marxism with more nuanced attention to non-economic determinants of existence, emphasizing elements such as cultural traditions, educational patterns and even physical dispositions. As Bourdieu's student Loic Waquant puts it in their collaborative monograph *An Invitation to Reflexivity* (1992), Bourdieu's sociology combines the traditional, "objectivist point of view" or "social physics" with a "subjectivist" or phenomenological point of view such that, "[t]o transcend these

dualities... First, we push aside mundane representations to construct the objective structures... the distribution of socially efficient resources that define the external constraints bearing on interactions. Second, we reintroduce the immediate, lived experience of agents in order to explicate the categories of perception and appreciation (dispositions) that structure their actions from inside” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 11). Importantly, Wacquant goes on to make clear that “epistemological priority is granted to objectivist rupture over subjectivist understanding” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 11). Though much more could be said about Bourdieu’s sociology, this is enough to lay a foundation for reviewing his notion of reflexivity, and how it differs from the autoethnographer’s.

It is worth noting that Bourdieu wrote extensively on reflexivity, turning it into one of his theoretical cornerstones and contributing greatly, perhaps more than any other thinker, to the rigorous development of that concept. In the short review of the concept I performed above, I noted that Foley (2002) positioned Bourdieu’s reflexivity, which he labeled ‘analytic’, all by itself against other varieties developed by other writers. This may serve to indicate both the depth of the concept as developed by Bourdieu and the degree to which others have relied on it. As Wacquant elaborates in their book,

*Bourdieu's brand of reflexivity... differs from others... First, its primary target is not the individual analyst but the social and intellectual unconscious embedded in analytic tools and operations; second, it must be a collective enterprise rather than the burden of the lone academic ; and, third, it seeks not to assault but to buttress the epistemological security of sociology. Far from trying to undermine objectivity, Bourdieu's reflexivity aims at increasing the scope and solidity of social scientific knowledge, a goal which puts it at loggerheads with phenomenological, textual and other 'postmodern' forms of reflexivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 37, emphasis added)*

As the emphasized portion makes clear, Bourdieu’s reflexivity is not a postmodern one, as is that deployed by autoethnographers. According to Wacquant, the superficial “textual reflexivity” advocated by those anthropologists who have recently grown infatuated with

the hermeneutic process of cultural interpretation in the field and the (re)making of reality through ethnographic inscription” has nothing in common with “genuine reflexivity... [which] does not require the use of the first person to emphasize empathy (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 41). ‘Genuine’ reflexivity “does not involve reflection of the subject on the subject... It entails, rather, the systematic exploration of the ‘unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought’” (40). This is how, as stated above, Bourdieu’s theory gives ‘epistemological priority’ to ‘objectivist rupture over subjectivist understanding’: for Bourdieu, the belief that individuals make unfettered, undetermined decisions is a “delusion” enjoyed by “Westerners” and so any attempt to understand why things are the way they are must, before all else, to uncover “the social at the heart of the individual, the impersonal beneath the intimate, the universal buried deep within the most peculiar” (55). As I have touched on and will elaborate below, this flips the attitude of the autoethnographer on its head, reversing her proposition to seek out the social within the individual. Thus the two positions are linked, if inverse images of each other. Nonetheless, Bourdieu sees enough difference there to feel comfortable articulating the following to Wacquant in an interview presented in the text:

I believe that the form of reflexivity I advocate is distinctive and paradoxical in that it is fundamentally anti-narcissistic. ... This is to say that the sociology of sociology I argue for has little in common with a complacent and intimist return upon the private person of the sociologist... I must also disassociate myself completely from the form of ‘reflexivity’ represented by the kind of self-fascinated observation of the observer’s writings and feelings which has recently become fashionable among some American anthropologists who... have turned to talking about themselves rather than about their object of research. When it becomes an end in itself, such falsely radical denunciation of ethnographic writing as ‘poetics and politics’ opens the door to a form of thinly veiled nihilistic relativism... that stands as the polar opposite to a truly reflexive social science (72)

Bourdieu's refusal of postmodernist interpretivism is quite solid, and he has no problem using it as a basis on which to repeat the central accusation of critics of autoethnography – that of supreme narcissism.

Amanda Coffey makes the same argument this way: “some would argue that [autoethnographic] texts are not 'doing' ethnography at all, but are self-indulgent writings published under the guise of social research and ethnography. Rather than utilizing literary and autobiographical devices to write ethnography we may be witnessing the use of ethnographic devices to write autobiography... This may be especially the case where the only 'field' which is being researched and presented is the researcher-self” (Coffey 1999, 156). Gans takes a step back in making the same point, by pointing to the postmodern roots of interpretive social science that have led to autoethnography being little more than “autobiography written by sociologists. It represents not only the climax of the preoccupation with the self that is at the heart of too much contemporary ethnography but also the product of a postmodern but asocial theory of knowledge that argues the impossibility of knowing anything beyond the self” (Gans 1999, 542). Gans then goes on to ensure that his loyalties to established norms of social science are clear, when he asserts that “[o]nce researchers fail to distance themselves from the people they are studying... or fail to allow them the same distancing, the rules of qualitative reliability are sidestepped, reducing the likelihood that sociologists and their work will be trusted by their readers” (543). Lofland offers a similar reproach of autoethnography, seemingly wanting to remind those autoethnographers he thinks have forgotten, that “the traditional norms of scholarship do not require that researchers bare their souls, only their procedures (Lofland 2006, 12). Perhaps Sparkes, in recounting a conversation held with another academic, puts it most succinctly

when quoting his colleague's opinion that autoethnography "sounded like an 'academic wank'; that is, a form of public masturbation" (Sparkes 2002, 212).

## **Autoethnography's Responses**

Most recently, Carolyn Ellis, one of the central practitioners of autoethnography, summarized her reading of anti-autoethnography positions as follows:

As part ethnography, autoethnography is dismissed for social scientific standards as being insufficiently rigorous, theoretical, and analytical, and too aesthetic, emotional, and therapeutic... Autoethnographers are criticized for doing too little fieldwork, for observing too few cultural members, for not spending enough time with (different) others... Furthermore, in using personal experience, autoethnographers are thought to not only use supposedly biased data... but are also navel-gazers, self-absorbed narcissists who don't fulfill scholarly obligations of hypothesizing, analyzing, and theorizing (Ellis, Adams et al. 2011, 37)

In short, Ellis finds that "critics want to hold autoethnography accountable to criteria normally applied to traditional ethnographies or to autobiographical standards of writing. Thus, autoethnography is criticized for either being too artful and not scientific, or too scientific and not sufficiently artful" (36). As indicated by Ellis, most responses of autoethnographers to the critiques reviewed above can be organized into two categories: those dealing with accusations of narcissism, and those outlining suitable criteria for the evaluation of autoethnography amid of accusations of failures of validity, reliability and credibility.

## **On Evaluating Autoethnography**

The theme of this position, as elaborated by most autoethnographers, is that autoethnography should not be judged by the same criteria as traditional forms of social science because, stemming from postmodernist sensibilities, it retains neither the same goals

nor the same methodological assumptions as 'modernist', conventional forms of social science. That is the basis of Ellis' argument that while the traditional metrics of "reliability, validity, and generalizability may be applied to autoethnography, the context, meaning and utility of these terms are altered" (Ellis, Adams et al. 2011, 32). Not surprisingly, the autoethnographic reinterpretation of these terms leaves little in common with their established scientific meanings. Instead of involving 'repeatability', Ellis argues that "[f]or an autoethnographer, questions of reliability refer to the narrator's credibility. Could the narrator have had the experiences described, given available 'factual evidence'... [or] has the narrator taken 'literary license' to the point that the story is better viewed as fiction than a truthful account" (33). Validity is perhaps more problematic since, in its traditional form, it requires reference to an external standard that has disciplinary currency as 'objective', and the postmodern foundations of autoethnography refute the possibility of such a standard. Therefore, Ellis argues that "[f]or autoethnographers, validity means that a work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true" (34). Clearly, the reliance on 'feelings' and 'experience' places this interpretation of validity squarely and intentionally outside traditional parameters of social science. Nor does Ellis' interpretation of generalizability for the evaluation of autoethnography fit with "the traditional, social scientific meaning that stems from, and applies to, large random samples of respondents. In autoethnography, the focus of generalizability moves from respondents to readers, and is always being tested by readers as they determine if a story speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know" (35). Here too the 'subjective' is invited to play a substantial role in evaluation, since the process now involves each reader and their

own, personal assessment of a work. It is important to note that, having eschewed traditional, proscriptive standards of evaluation, Ellis does not now attempt to download such prescriptions onto readers by specifying, for example, that they should 'logical', 'deductive', 'empirical' or any other particular method when evaluating autoethnography. Such a move would fly in the face of the broader goals of autoethnography as understood by Ellis and most others, since "the questions most important to autoethnographers are: who reads our work, how are they affected by it, and *how does it keep a conversation going*" (39). Promoting conversation takes precedence over following traditional norms dictating methods for supporting truth-claims.

This is a central element of the autoethnographic response to much of the criticism it receives. As Skott-Myhre puts it, "[w]riters of autoethnography are not interested in developing a specified framework for others to follow. This is too much like other formalized methods of inquiry which in many ways limit and constrain ways of collecting information" (Skott-Myhre, Weima et al. 2012, xv). Reducing such constraints is paramount for many autoethnographers, who pursue that goal by refusing to follow many established guidelines for social science. The theoretical supports for this move, having been fleshed out through much postmodernist work, are less the target of criticism than the particular methodologies of autoethnography, especially the author's self-attention and active place in the text. As Nicholas L. Holt describes the responses to his repeated attempts to publish his autoethnographic work, "[t]he majority of the reviewers' comments were directed at making the autoethnography more realist, which would then enable them to evaluate it using more established, acceptable, and accessible criteria" (Holt 2003, 25). Autoethnographers tend to

respond that such criticism misses the subversive, disruptive goals intentionally guiding those methods, as when Denzin replies that

Ethnography is a not an innocent practice. Our research practices are performative, pedagogical, and political. Through our writing and our talk, we enact the worlds we study. These performances are messy and pedagogical. They instruct our readers about this world and how we see it. The pedagogical is always moral and political; by enacting a way of seeing and being, it challenges, contests, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other (Denzin 2006, 422)

As with most postmodernist writing, part of the intended process is to use the text itself to represent, but more, to enact, the expressly political goal of the act of which the text is but one case.

This work does 'not do' most of what Mykhalovskiy outlines, and seeks instead to present a personalized, engaged social scientific discussion of the experience of superheroes. The following extended quote makes the case very directly:

I was particularly drawn to feminist postmodernist critiques that called for a more self-reflexive social science. These analyses supported my view that the abstract, disembodied voice of traditional academic discourse was a fiction, accomplished through writing and other practices which remove evidence of a text's author, as part of concealing the conditions of its production. I have come to think of the criteria of sociological orthodoxy as expressed by a masculine academic discourse or voice... Authoritative, at times arrogant, it is a voice that speaks unitarily and with confidence. At its worst it floats, depersonalized, above actual speech, booming loudly with knowledge of the other, inviting its listeners readers to be persuaded through its reason and reasonableness. Autobiographical sociology gives offense to this voice. As sociology, it comes to 'not' speak in that it does not rely on standard ways of being sociologically meaningful to readers. Autobiographical sociology does not, for example, deploy a calculative reasoning through which the social is understood as the interplay of variables. It does not present the results of research on others. It does not reach for the heights of theoretical abstraction, nor present evidence in test of a theory. To the extent that the experiences of its authors are its subject, those experiences are not presented as data; are not worked up as a case or instance of something else (Mykhalovskiy 1996, 135)

This characterization of 'traditional academic discourse' is interpretive and highly subjective. But it is for that very reason that it carries whatever weight it does and, in my case, it seems very weighty indeed.

Sparkes warns that, [a]s researchers begin to develop ways to judge autoethnography I hope they can resist the temptation to seek universal, foundational criteria... [rather] we need to construct our criteria for judging various forms of inquiry as we go along (Sparkes 2002, 223). But, like Ellis, Laurel Richardson is prepared to offer her evaluative criteria for consideration by others. Ellison assesses autoethnography on five criteria: substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact and expression of a reality (Richardson 2000). Also like Ellis, Richardson makes clear that she effectively assesses autoethnographic works with criteria that explicitly appeal to subjective categories.

## **On Narcissism**

When reviewing the work of Pierre Bourdieu above, I showed that he viewed the central sociological task as revealing the 'social at the heart of the individual', the ways in which the choices we make are determined by the social conditions into which we are inserted. In his opinion, the 'textual reflexivity' practiced by those using an autoethnographic writing-style left them incapable of producing such analyses. Sparkes tells of a colleague with a similar attitude who, when faced with a student's autoethnographic work, responded that "[i]t is very hard to make good sociology... from a single case study, especially if it is one's own. We all have stories. Indeed, we all have lived lives, and I'm not sure we're doing scholarship, and sociology, a favour by 'sociologizing' them" (Sparkes 2002, 212). Sparkes' response is confusion, as he wonders why the immediate recourse it to terms like 'self-indulgent', "[w]hy not use different terms, such as self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing or self-

luminous” (Sparkes 2002, 212). In an autoethnographic text that has her teaching a class, Ellis responds this way to accusations of self-absorption on the part of autoethnographers: “it's self-absorbed to pretend that you are somehow outside of what you study and not impacted by the same forces as others. It's self-absorbed to mistakenly think that your actions and relationships need no reflexive thought... If culture circulates through all of us, then how can autoethnography not connect to a world beyond the self” (Ellis 2003, 34).<sup>34</sup>

### **My use of Autoethnography**

I find many of these rebuttals cogent and intelligent. Ellis’ statement in particular resonates with me and mirrors my own ontological assumptions in creating this dissertation, which I elaborate below. Returning for a moment to the work of Bourdieu, it is worth mentioning that *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* (2008), his most self-analytical work, is a 118-page monograph of which he is the principal topic and for which he faced criticisms of self-indulgence and narcissism (Bourdieu 2008). So it is somewhat ironic that he would, as demonstrated above, respond not just by defending himself from such accusations but, in the same breath, throw others who engage in similar work under the very same bus, under a pretense of richer theoretical engagement (which, to this reader, fail thoroughly and completely, especially in *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*). A more convincing and entirely more useful approach for Bourdieu to have taken might have been to recognize, as does Mykhalovskiy, that any “claim of narcissism rests in an individual/social dualism that obfuscates how writing about the self

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<sup>34</sup> Others have made similar arguments in different ways (see for example (Mykhalovskiy 1996; Bochner and Ellis 2002; Holt 2003; Lofland 2006; Atkinson, Delamont et al. 2008), but I find this formulation by Ellis the most succinct and captivating.

involves, at the same time, writing about the "other" and how work on the "other" is also about the self of the writer" (Mykhalovskiy 1996, 133). Or, as Mary Evans puts it, a study of the individual illustrates the social, and re-affirms the centrality of certain general themes in the lives of all particular individuals (Evans 1993, 8). Though she goes too far asserting 'general themes' relevant to 'all' individuals, the broad theme seems correct to me: biographical analysis can reveal as much about social life as any other 'micro' form, or any 'macro' form, of sociological analysis. One only has to be asking suitable questions and looking for appropriate answers.

To recap somewhat, I have positioned autoethnography as a growing field of social science inquiry premised on the belief that useful and interesting understandings of social reality can be derived from attention to the experiences of the author. Autoethnography positions interpretation (of experience and understanding) and reflexivity (self-attention on the part of the author) as useful, fruitful avenues of investigation of social reality. Social reality, in this view, is understood as the connections and relationships among individuals, the ways in which they understand those connections and the understandings of those connections that sociological investigation can draw out, as well as the larger 'social forces' – such as but not limited to cultural, economic, and political contexts – into which the connections among individuals are inserted and develop.

In the rest of this section I further develop my views and the arguments of this dissertation, by highlighting the selective use I have made of the autoethnographic principles reviewed above. To anticipate the general theme in the position sketched out below, I support the arguments made throughout this dissertation by borrowing from among the

theoretical principles and methodological guidelines of an established and growing tradition among the qualitative social sciences.

In my reading of the field, most autoethnographic works consist mostly of first-person narratives; many also deal with difficult or painful emotional matters; and, some subject the previous experiences of the author to critical examination, in order to draw new conclusions and self-understandings. In these respects, this work is not fully autoethnographic in that I deploy only the first and last of these devices, and those not to the same extent as do most autoethnographies. That said, I have already demonstrated that autoethnographers themselves have little interest in locating or creating a singular mold for autoethnography which remains, even as it propagates across academic disciplines, a very messy and unbounded method of inquiry. Though some of the authors reviewed above have proposed 'rules' for autoethnography, most autoethnographers are more concerned with experimenting – playing is probably a more apt term – *with* the method than thinking *about* the method.

This work is fundamentally autoethnographic in a number of ways. **First, it relies in large measure upon my understanding of and experiences with the superhero genre for developing and supporting my claim and subsidiary arguments.** I lay out that understanding and, in some cases the experiences that have contributed to them, in a manner intended to be clear and accessible to a reader, using plain though sometimes emotive prose. However, throughout the dissertation, I switch frequently and easily between descriptive, analytical and interpretive writing, blending attempts to convey the content of comics and other visual media through words, with attempts to convey my understanding of that content and my conclusions about its relevance to other topics such as seriality and aesthetic intensity. This

style may be off-putting to readers who, like some of the ethnographers discussed above, feel that description, analysis and interpretation should be separated from one another in academic texts. But like other autoethnographers, I find such a methodology to be founded on the ontologically untenable position that qualitative data *can* be stripped of subjective interpretation, and the logically false premise that a particular voice or positioning of the author within the text can accomplish such transformation. I have chosen to present my argument in a manner following the autoethnographic tradition because, first, it agrees with my ontological perspectives and, second, because it reflects the kind of writing, academic or otherwise, that I find most *educational* – that is, informative *and* engaging. Isolating either of those characteristics, no matter how powerfully, only weakens the final product.

**The second way in which this is an autoethnographic work is that it is interpretive.** This was just touched on but bears highlighting since that, rather than writing style, author's position, or any other factor, puts this work at risk of misunderstanding and unsympathetic critique. Throughout parts of this project I review *parts of aspects* of the history of superheroes, namely, *some* of the ways in which: the content of their stories changed with respect to melodrama; the content and form of their stories changed with respect to seriality; and the content, form and possibilities for experience of their stories have changed with respect to those changes and other changes reflected in their different portrayals across different media. Those historical discussions are, as I believe any historical discussion to be, partial and interpreted, not just in the topics I have chosen to focus on, but in those I leave out and the questions with which I selected among those topics. There is no question that I have covered 'everything' that could be covered, or even everything that another researcher might see as important to my chosen questions – I have not, and no work interested in

making an honest effort to communicate an idea in the hopes of 'further discussion' could claim to, either. That is not hubris, it is an ontological position steeped in what can be called postmodern sensibilities that reject any claim to 'the answer' or 'the whole story' in matters of social history, cultural production and experiences of any kind. Like the autoethnographers discussed above, my goal in this work is to communicate my experience of superheroes in a manner that is evocative in presenting those experiences as the result of particular social, historical and cultural formations in which I take part. My experiences are my basis for this work, but that is not, in my view, narcissism. To paraphrase Carolyn Ellis, it would be narcissistic for me to assume that my experiences are unique that they do not capture something of the experiences had by others as well, and therefore that my communication and analysis of them would not, therefore, speak to others about their experiences as well. Rather, I present my experiences, and my reflections upon them, as someone located at a particular intersection of the superhero genre, comic, film and television media, and sociological training. This work makes *that* position clear, hopefully in a manner that would allow others in different positions to further reflect upon and engage with their own position and experiences.

This work is also autoethnographic in that it was written, **third, with an underlying desire to stimulate further discussion about the merits of first-person narrative for creating knowledge claims, and fourth, to appeal to and engage others interested in superhero popularity and the nature of the intensity of their myriad experiences with superheroes.**<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The latter was unavoidable for me, as I could not bear the thought of creating a work aimed solely at an audience of academics. This is a simple truth of the outcomes of my post-graduate work: the academy has

The four points just elaborated also highlight that this work is closely situated in relation to passionate sociology and lyrical sociology. Like these sociological approaches, this work hopes to “deepen [the] experience” (Game and Metcalfe 1996, 5) of readers, sometimes through “the use of a single image to communicate a mood, an emotional sense of social reality” (Abbott 2007, 73). I do, contrary to the guidelines of lyrical sociology, employ narrative prose at times throughout this work in order to “tell... what happened and perhaps to explain it” (73). But my primary purpose in this work is not analysis or rational explanation; it is the communication of powerful, subjective experiences through the medium of words, with the goal of making those experiences intelligible to others in order hopefully to stimulate some matching experience, or recollection of experience, in the reader. It is fair to say that the important, but secondary pursuit of this work is to communicate my rationalized, interpretive sociological understanding of these experiences in order to contribute to the social sciences.

## **Conclusion**

Autoethnography is a sociological tradition that began around the late 1970s and deploys theoretical, methodological and political sensibilities concomitant with the postmodern turn in social science: a distrust of authority, eschewal of grand narrative and a subject/divide, and emphasis on interpretation of day-to-day experiences of small groups or individuals in

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shown me that, were it my ‘calling’, it would be as a teacher rather than as a researcher. My heart lies in motivating others to learn by speaking to and with them, not in speaking at them in ways that do not reach them.

pursuit of understanding of social phenomena. Autoethnography pushes the boundaries of ethnography in that it often takes the form of narrative, and includes reflexive analysis to be part of sociological analysis, not apart from it. Critiques of autoethnography include narcissism and failure to follow traditional guidelines for social science, but autoethnographers have, particularly in recent years, countered these critiques by offering alternative ways to evaluate autoethnographic works, and arguing that it is not narcissistic for an author to presume him or herself to be one example of how biography and social forces interact. This dissertation is an autoethnographic work in that it relies in large measure on the author's subjective experience of the aesthetic intensity of superheroes as evidence, and in that it is designed to promote conversation and more ideas, rather than to make an 'airtight case' for the author's position, which would be the truly narcissistic move.

## 2 Superhero Proliferation

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This chapter begins what I referred to in the Introduction as the first stage of my project, in which I establish the current state of sales of superhero comics. I do this in order to demonstrate that, while my impression is that superheroes have recently found increased popularity, that impression is somewhat confounded by superhero comic sales being near their all-time low. I rely on statistical information gathered by another source to make this point, since I do not intend this aspect of my discussion to contribute new knowledge.

I then look beyond comics, to review the recent increase of superhero films produced by Hollywood film studios. Though this phenomenon does lend some support to my impression of increased popularity, that support is again somewhat fractured by particular attendance metrics. I interpret these results in light of my impressions of superhero popularity as a superhero fan and 'insider', reflecting that rather than increased popularity, my impressions are the result of my personal experiences with the superhero genre vis-à-vis its recent proliferation into new cultural spaces, such as adult-aimed advertising. This proliferation into new kinds of popular culture has put superheroes to new kinds of work and placed them into the everyday lexicon of adult non-fans in entirely new ways, some examples of which I describe and interpret in light of my 'fannish' impressions of recently increased popularity of the superhero genre.

## A 'death spiral' for superhero comics?

Just what counts as the 'first comic' is debated among comic scholars, largely because attempts to define precisely what a comic is have ranged widely.<sup>36</sup> Among such efforts, authors, only some of them scholars, have varyingly located the birth of American comic books in 1934 (Eisner 2006, 3), 1933 (Beaty 2010), the 1890s (Wright 2001, 2; Gordon 1998, 7), and 1842 (Gabilliet, Beaty et al. 2010, 3), and pointed to the first comics as artifacts created in the 9<sup>th</sup> century (McCloud 1993), or argued that "the juxtaposition of words and images is as old as language itself" (Wright 2001, 2). My focus is on the superhero genre, not the comic medium, so I do not enter that debate, and thankfully the birth of the superhero genre is much more widely agreed upon: Superman's first appearance in the first issue of *Action Comics*, published in the summer of 1938.

Comics are the medium with the longest and deepest involvement with superheroes, as no other medium relies on superheroes as its principal product and there are no media more dedicated than comics to telling superhero stories. Comics are thus also the medium through which the category 'superhero' and its constituent tropes and generic attributes have been most developed, making comics the traditional home – or headquarters – of the superhero. No examination of the superhero genre would be complete without a review of its comics-based history.

In the Introduction, I quoted from a recent monograph by renowned superhero comic-writer Grant Morrison, in which he expressed an experience to similar to mine – a

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<sup>36</sup> Bart Beaty's *Comics versus Art* (Beaty 2012) provides extensive review and critical interrogation of the history of defining comics.

recent and surprising proliferation of superheroes into new spaces, which he colorfully phrased as the 'ongoing, bloodless surrender of mainstream culture to relentless colonization from the geek hinterlands'. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine about that book, Morrison provided other opinions:

**DC is relaunching its entire line – is there some desperation there?**

There's always going to be a bit of that because comics sales are so low, people are willing to try anything these days. It's just plummeting. It's really bad from month to month. May was the first time in a long time that no comic sold over 100,000 copies, so there's a decline.

**Do you think this is the death spiral?**

Yeah. I kind of do, but again, you can always be wrong. There's a real feeling of things just going off the rails, to be honest. Superhero comics. The concept is quite a ruthless concept, and it's moved on, and it's kind of abandoned, the first-stage rocket.

**Abandoning comics?**

And moving on to movies, where it can be more powerful, more effective...With comics, the quality now is better than it's ever been, there are more people now who are really good at what they do, doing what they do. Everything's available for free, I think that's the real problem, nobody wants to buy it anymore. One comes out, you see it immediately online and you can read it. That's the way people want to consume their information, the colors look nicer. I think that's more the problem, but that's a problem for everybody, it's not just for comics, everyone's going to start feeling that one (Hiatt 2011)

Morrison is not a publisher, but he is widely considered to be the best contemporary superhero comic writer, lending his comments a certain gravitas. Contrasting Morrison's two claims, that superheroes are hugely popular now, and that superhero comics are in a 'death spiral', points to a puzzling contradiction and raises the question of whether, or how, both sentiments can be correct. As I discussed in the introduction, that conundrum forms the research problem of this dissertation, most of which presents arguments intended to convey the ways in which superheroes have proliferated into new spaces in recent years, indicating to me (and Morrison) increased popularity for them. In what follows immediately, I present some data examining comic sales, in order further to investigate

whether superhero comics are indeed in a ‘death spiral’, and, if they are, to consider that fact in relation to my own sense of their great proliferation.

## Comic Sales

Graph 1,<sup>37</sup> below, illustrates the history of comic book sales<sup>38</sup> in North America since *Action Comics* #1. After a relatively gentle start, comic sales began a fast climb around 1944, thanks to the huge quantities shipped to military personnel serving overseas during World War II. The climb continued until 1955-56, when comics reached their zenith in sales. The straight drop through the early 1960s captures the period in which DC was one of the few publishers printing superhero comics, while other genres – primarily horror, ‘true’ crime, romance and humour – took the lead in declining sales.

By removing the huge peak and valley of the 1940s and 50s, Graph 2 more effectively conveys variations in comic sales over the last forty years. Sales continued to drop, albeit more slowly, through the late 60s and early 1970s, the period in which publisher Marvel came to rival DC in the superhero comic market. Bart Beaty calls this “a decades-long period of economic contraction that would winnow the number of publishers, curtail employment opportunities, and see the survivors pursue a single lucrative genre – superheroes – to the near-total exclusion of other alternatives” (Beaty 2010, 203). The late 1970s and early 1980s did see some new growth in the comic market, a change Bradford Wright (1991) attributes mainly to a new, ‘direct marketing’ system that emerged in the United States around that

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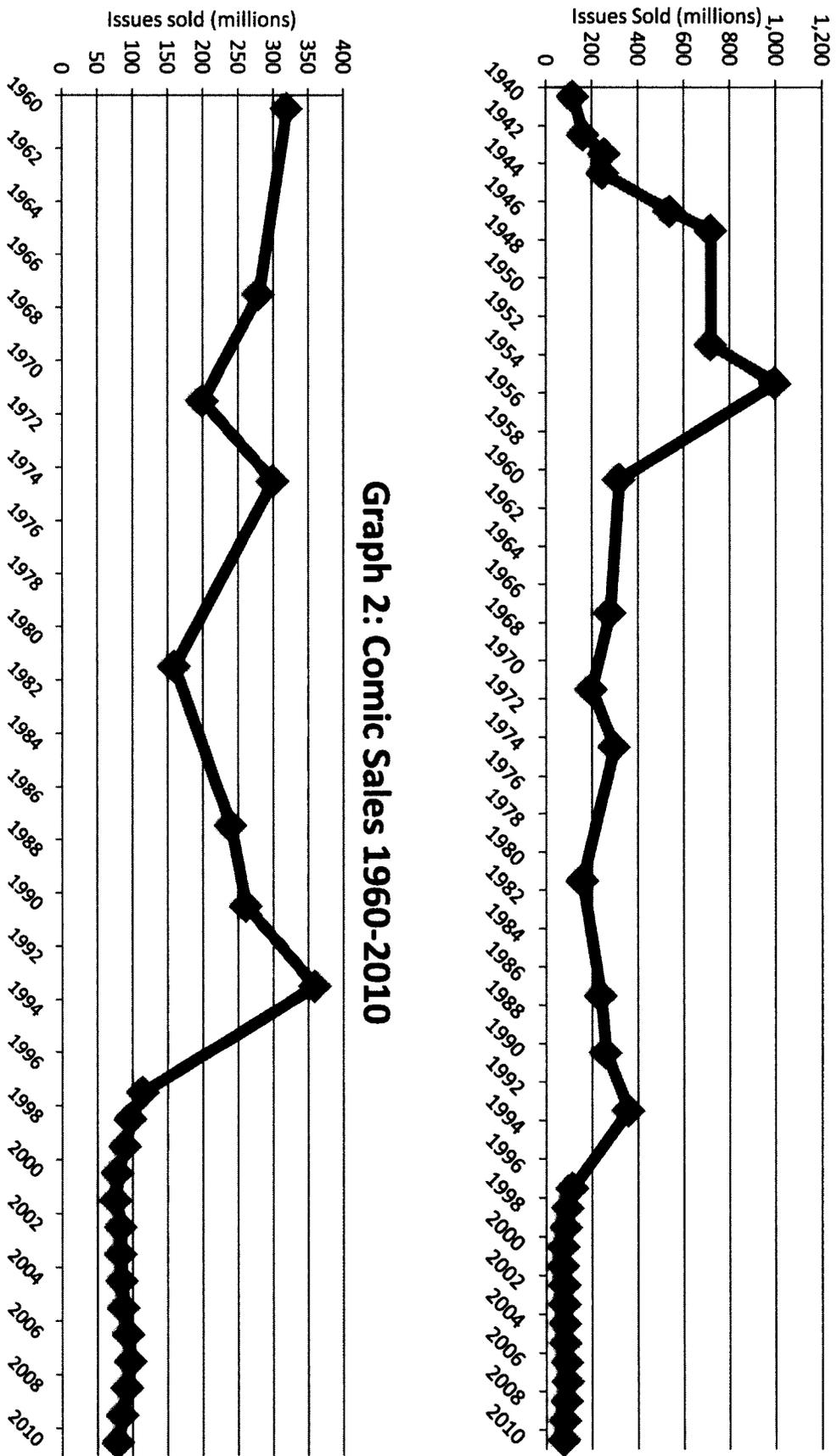
<sup>37</sup> Background information on the creation of the graphs in this chapter appears in Appendix 1.

<sup>38</sup> It is important to note that all of the statistical data presented in this section, unless otherwise noted, refer to sales of traditional staple-bound, ‘floppy’ comics of all genres, not only superhero comics. I address this matter later in this chapter.

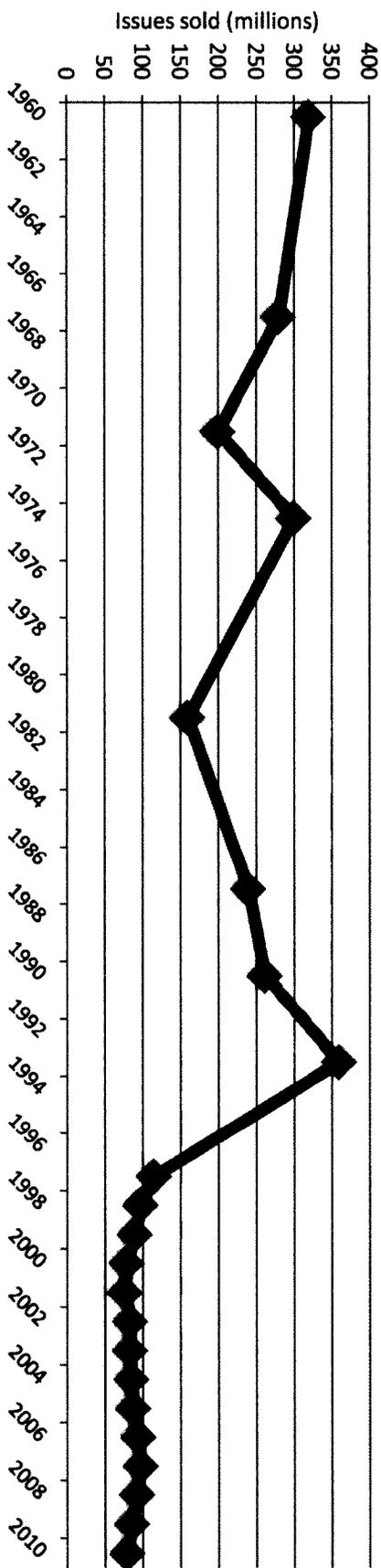
time, in which shops specializing in the sale of comics and little else began appearing. Unlike pharmacies, newsstands and other, early comic book retailers who could return unsold comics to publishers or distributors, comics specialty shops bought their comics on a non-returnable basis in order to receive discounted prices, which they could pass on to their customers. In addition, these shops could promise their customers a regular supply of their preferred comics in good physical condition, something other retailers could not do and an attractive feature for comic fans and collectors, a newly recognized market for publishers. Wright notes that, thanks to the 'guaranteed sales' they made to specialty shops, publishers claimed an immediate increase in sales, as reflected in the tables below. However, that number does not necessarily reflect increased retail purchases, as comics ordered by specialty shops sometimes did not sell immediately, and were 'bagged and boarded', stored for possible future sale as a 'collectible' in the emerging comics-speculation market. The growth that began in the early 1980s suffered during two "glut" periods (Beaty 2010, 204), before rampant comics speculation in the early-1990s drove comic sales to heights unseen since the 1960s. Around that period, publishers "adopted techniques from the collectible sports card market. They released many popular titles with multiple covers and included trading cards inside comic books in order to foster a speculator frenzy that would drive avid consumers to purchase multiple copies of the same comic book" (Beaty 2010, 204). Beaty asserts that, though such tactics contributed to sales in the "short term... Audiences soon grew tired of poor quality products and gimmick packaging and abandoned comic stores in droves" (Beaty 2010, 204). Sales peaked in 1993 before crashing to new lows. No data are publically available for sales over the next 4 years, the 'crash' period of 1993-97, during which comic sales dropped

by almost 75%. Graphs 3 and 4 illustrate trends since the resumption of data-collection after the crash.

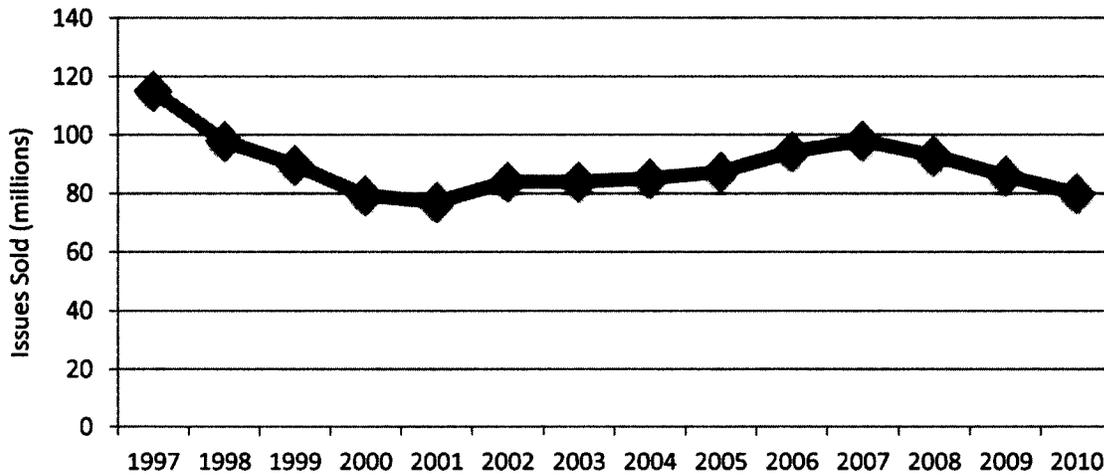
**Graph 1: Comic Sales since 1940**



**Graph 2: Comic Sales 1960-2010**

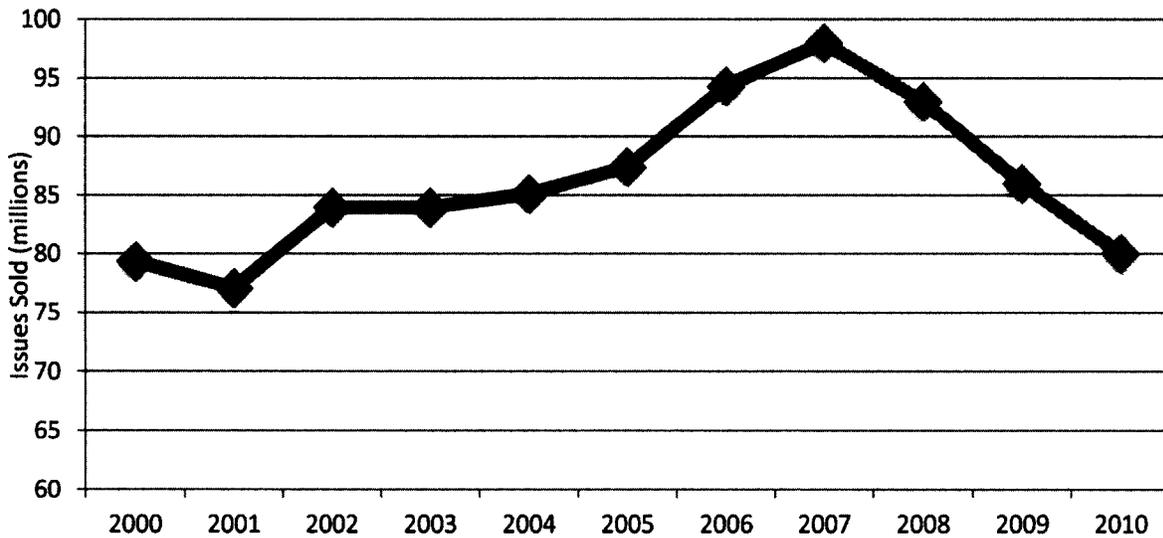


### Graph 3: Diamond's Top 300 1997-2010



Graph 3 illustrates undulating sales since 1997. Graph 4, below, focuses on sales since 2000, since that is the starting-point I am using for what I see as the proliferation of superheroes in popular culture

### Graph 4: Diamond's Top 300 2000-2010



According to these statistics, despite a rise in sales between 2003 and 2007, comic sales in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have not achieved even half their numbers before the 1994 crash, let alone the numbers seen in earlier decades. Graph 4 also makes clear a steady drop in sales since 2007.

### The confusing role of 'Comics with spines'

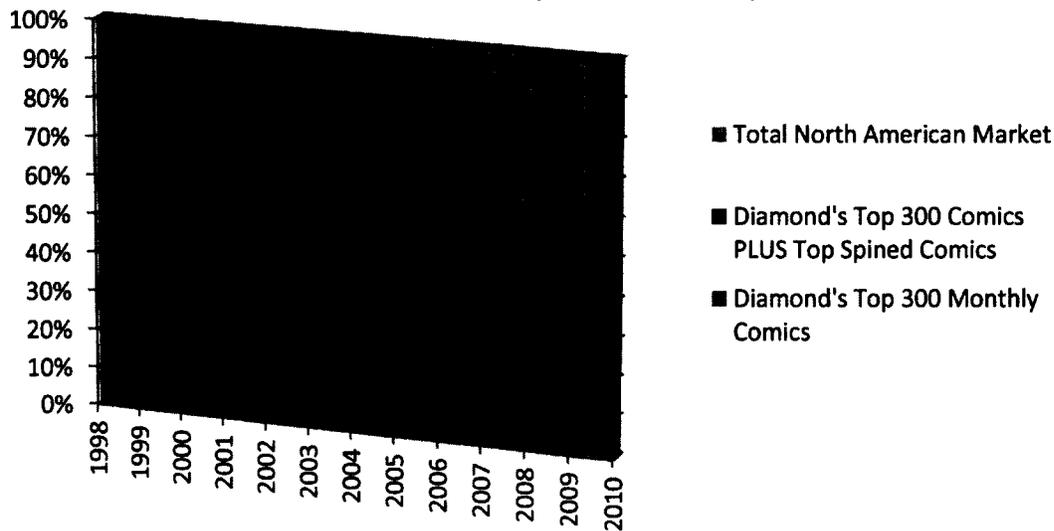
One increasingly important deficiency with the 'Top 300' figures is that they do not include sale figures for 'comics with spines', a useful catch-all phrase for two alternate comic-book formats: trade-paperbacks and graphic novels.<sup>39</sup> Graphs 5 and 6<sup>40</sup> contrast three different data-sets which include comics with spines, and provide a somewhat different perspective on the comic-book industry than discussed so far.

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<sup>39</sup> The two terms are often used interchangeably since the formats have some common features, such as one-off or irregular publishing schedules, at least double or triple the number of pages of a 'regular' (or 'floppy') monthly comic, covers made of heavy card-stock or other 'hard' materials, a hard spine and no ads within the story-telling pages. It is more technically correct to distinguish trade-paperbacks as publications collecting stories previously published as floppies, from graphic novels, which are comics with spines presenting original material, typically in the form of a single and complete story (rather than a series of disconnected stories, or stories that fit into a larger story-arc). 'Graphic novel' is also sometimes used as an evaluative term meant to indicate a publication's extraordinary sophistication (literary, artistic, or otherwise) as compared to other comics. I eschew this usage, which only demonstrates prejudice against anything called a 'comic'.

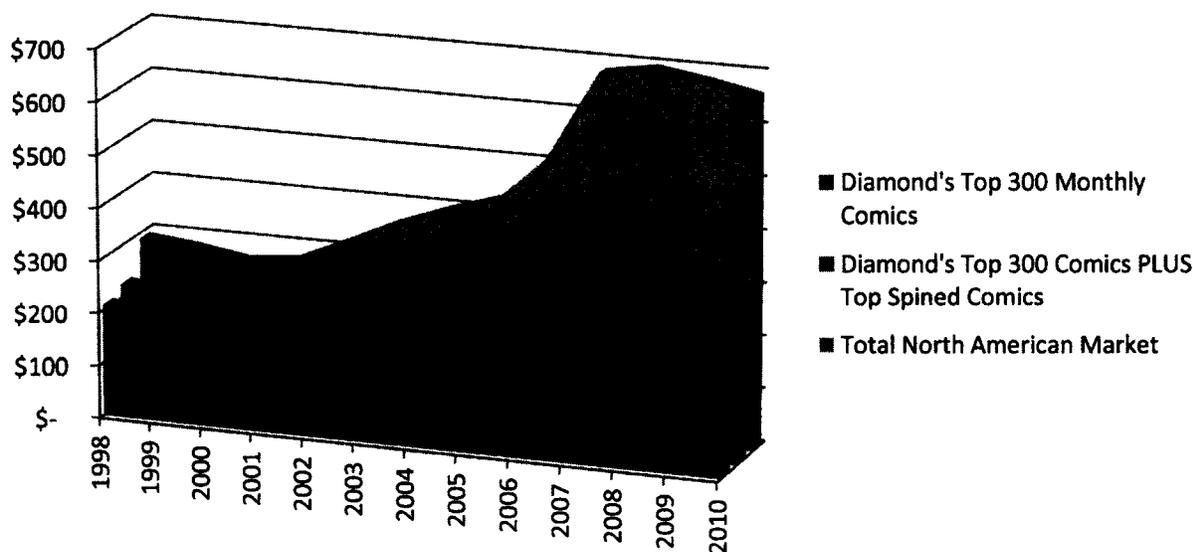
<sup>40</sup> These data, like the data above, are based on self-reporting by Diamond (see Appendix 1), which releases only dollar figures, not units-sold figures, for the spined-comics it sells to retailers each month. Since spined-comics range in price far more greatly than do regular monthly comics, it is not possible to use dollar-sales to calculate or even estimate the number of units sold. Therefore, the only way to combine spined-comic data with regular comic data is to report all values in dollars.

**Graph 5: North American Comic Sales, all formats and vendors (market-share)**



In Graph 5, the blue strip along the bottom represents the contribution of Diamond's Top 300 monthly comics to the overall North American comics market, year by year. Since 1998, the contribution of those most popular comics has decreased by roughly 10%. Over that same period, all of the monthly comics as well as the spined comics distributed by Diamond (again, the sole distributor for specialty comic stores), which obviously constitutes a larger segment of the total market (shown in red), has also come to contribute about 10% less, down to 50% from 60%. This means that the remaining percentage of comic sales, those comics not distributed by Diamond or sold in specialty comic-shops, has increased during that period. This is visible in Graph 5 by the growth of the green strip as the years progress. By itself, Graph 5 therefore demonstrates the value of comics with spines, not captured by the metrics above, to the comics market. But Graph 6 presents the same data in a different format, providing a somewhat surprising result.

**Graph 6: North American Comic Sales, all formats and vendors (USD millions)**



Here we see that despite the lessening importance of Diamond's sales to specialty stores, the *total comics market* has actually increased, *more than doubling*, since 1998.

Since 2002 and particularly since 2006, comic-sales have *increased* outside specialty shops, thanks in large measure to publishers' efforts to "channel comics toward the traditional book market" (Beaty 2010, 204). One of the distinguishing features of spined comics in the last decade has been their increasing presence in large bookstores, which tend now to have at least a small, if not a large, section devoted completely to spined-comics of all genres. Amazon.com and other similar internet stores are also popular sites for the purchase of spined-comics.

This growth of spined-comic sections in bookstores was one of the phenomena that gave me the impression in recent years that superheroes were moving into new territories.<sup>41</sup> It indicated to me that comics, and among them superhero comics, were finding *new* audiences, not just larger ones. While the data presented above seem to support that possibility, other data do not.

Since 2003, Brian Hibbs has been accessing sales-data for the American bookstore market, privately collected, tracked and analyzed by the Nielsen subsidiary BookScan.<sup>42</sup> These data are completely separate from the data presented above, which related specifically to comic specialty shops. BookScan data have the advantage of being point-of-sale data, thus capturing retail sales to individuals, not sales from publishers to specialty shops as does the data above. It is, therefore, arguably a better metric for analyzing the ‘popularity’ of superhero comics than Graphs 5 and 6 above, which capture only the sales that put comics on

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<sup>41</sup> The cause for the rise in publication of spined-comics – a format virtually unknown prior to the mid-1980s, mainly due to this format’s higher production costs – is cause for much ongoing speculation, and not a topic I address here.

<sup>42</sup> Hibbs’ most recent analysis, that of BookScan’s 2011 data, can be found at <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=36900>. That page also contains links to Hibbs’ previous analyses. Hibbs begins his 2011 report with over a full page of ‘exceptions’ that may taint BookScan data, and then provides this warning: “Really, what I’m trying to get across to you is that this really is *entirely unreliable data in terms of the absolute and total number of books sold*, and is only able to give the broadest possible outline of what’s happening in book stores, based upon the data-set that I’m being given, which is *in no way comprehensive*. I still think that’s better than having *no* information, so I persevere in writing this each year” (Hibbs 2012). I appreciate and take seriously his warning, but present his data here nevertheless, as a useful metric – and the only one I could find – of relevant book sales.

bookstore shelves, not in readers' hands. It also captures data for each discrete product sold, meaning BookScan data can be categorized by genre.

Hibbs' analyses of BookScan present the case that superheroes are not highly involved in bookstore sales of spined comics. The most highly-purchased genre of spined comic since 2003 has consistently been Manga, or Japanese comics, usually translated into English. Manga comics are rarely superhero comics, and in any case the arguments of this dissertation relate to Western superhero comics. Hibbs ranks DC first in bookstore sales among 'Western publishers', but argues that, despite an increase in sales of their highest-selling comics, their overall sales through bookstores have remained mostly flat since 2007. Marvel ranks far lower among Western publishers at number eight, showing declining sales since 2007. Two other comics publishers, Image and Darkhorse, actually rank higher than Marvel, and none of their highest-selling comics are superhero comics.

### **Superhero Comics: Conclusions**

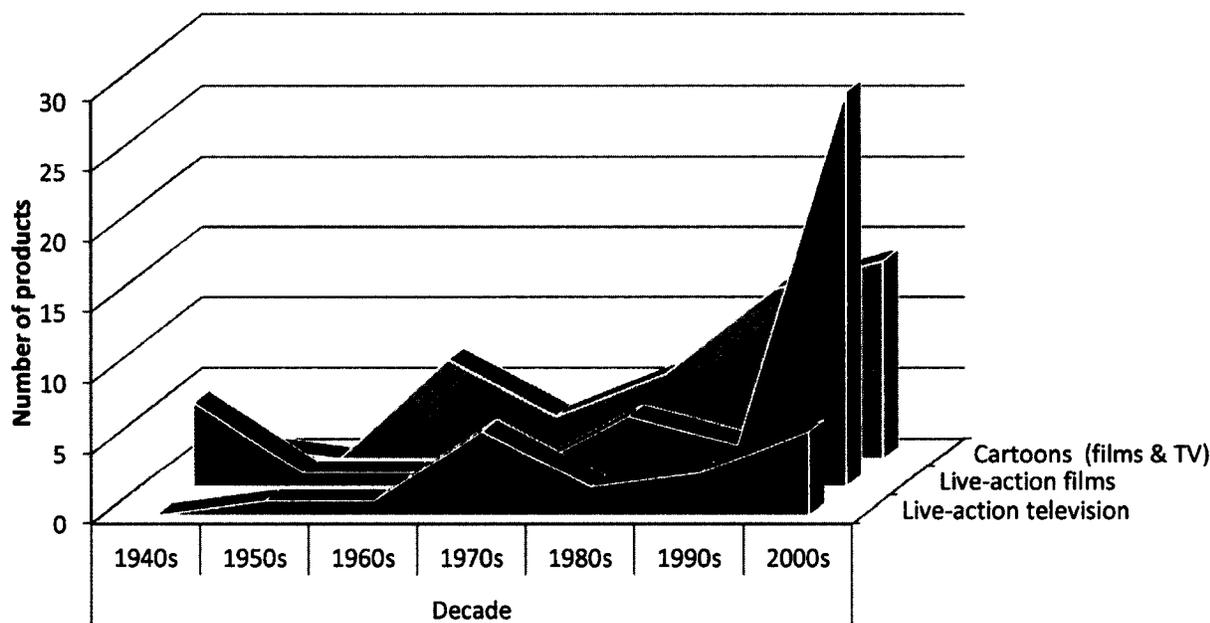
Superhero comics have been more widely purchased – and, likely, read – in previous decades than they currently are, and their sales have been slowly falling over the past two decades. To the degree that sales of superhero comics reflect the popularity of superheroes, it is difficult to sustain an argument that this popularity has increased in recent years. In the next section, I conduct a similar, partial and interpretive historical analysis of superheroes in two other important media, television and films, in light of my impression of their recently increased popularity.

## **Superheroes beyond comics**

Superheroes have existed outside comics almost as long as within them. As in the comic books, Superman led the way for superheroes into other media, appearing in newspaper comic strips less than one year after his debut and on radio one year after that (Daniels 1995, 67, 70). Some other, lesser-known superheroes, such as the Blue Beetle and the Green Hornet, also appeared on radio, but none equaled Superman's popularity in the field of children's radio, a medium dominated by detectives and darker, pulp-fiction characters. By 1941, Superman was appearing in animated 'shorts', seven-minute mini-films shown in theatres (Daniels 1995, 68). Batman and Robin followed Superman to radio by being featured as guests on his program, but received their own, live-action film in 1949, one year before the first Superman live-action film (Daniels 1995, 76, 80). Other movie serials based on superheroic characters soon followed, including those featuring Captain Marvel, the Phantom and other licensed characters who had mostly originated in comics. In 1953 Superman once again took the lead, as the first superhero to appear in a weekly, live-action television program (Daniels 1995, 109). By the 1960s, Superman and Batman were joined on television in animated form by Marvel characters including Spider-Man, Thor, Captain America and the Hulk, and superhero cartoons continued to proliferate through the 1970s, 80s and until today. Graph 7 contrasts the number of discrete, non-comic superhero products

created, by decade, across three entertainment sectors: live-action television (blue graph), live-action films (red graph) and cartoons (green graph).<sup>43</sup>

**Graph 7: Television and Film Superhero Products since 1940**



It is perhaps unsurprising to find that, of the three media forms on which I am focused<sup>44</sup>, superheroes have appeared most often in animated form. Cartoons, like comics and like

<sup>43</sup> I have included 2010-12 products in the '2000's' category, both to simplify the graph and in order to convey the upward trend in film production.

<sup>44</sup> In this section I focus on superheroes on television and in film. However, as I noted in the Introduction, superheroes have appeared in many others forms as well, including games, video games, costumes, branded clothing, branded undergarments, school supplies, posters, paintings, novels, magazines, statues and homeware/

superheroes, are presumed to appeal to children and thus the connection among them seems common-sensical. Though it could be argued that many contemporary cartoons, like many contemporary comics, are powerful entertainment for adults as well, I do not take up that argument here. Rather, I focus on the more unexpected fact that, during the 2000-2010 decade, the number of *live-action* superhero films made actually surpassed the number of cartoon products made in film and television combined. This explosion of superhero 'blockbuster' films is perhaps the most obvious way in which superheroes have entered 'new territory', and so I focus on it now.

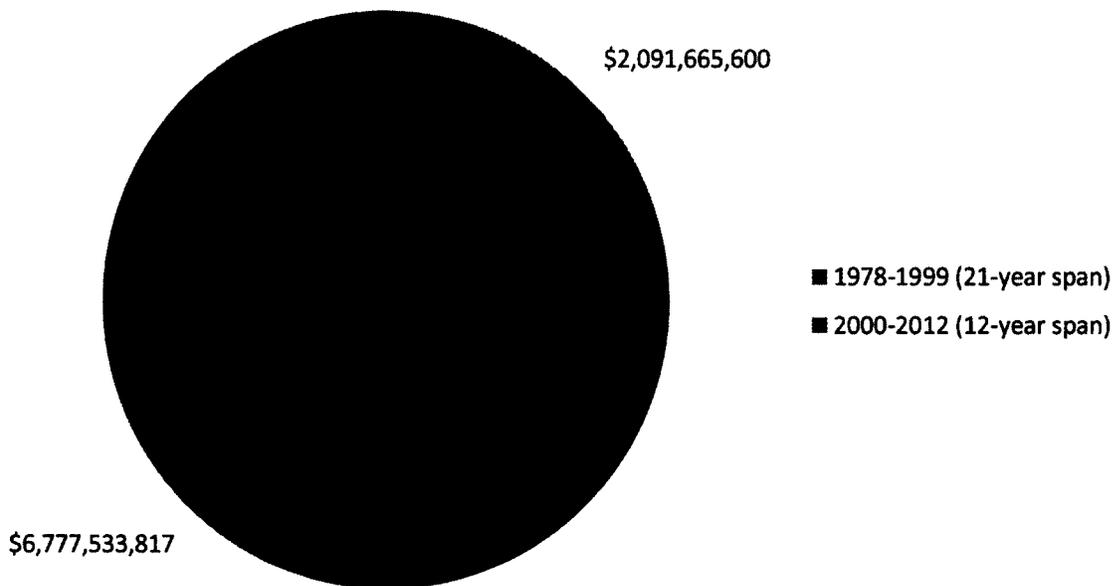
Unlike the serials of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, live-action superhero films since 1978's *Superman* have been created for adult and young-adult, not child, audiences.<sup>45</sup> Graph 8 illustrates the growth of superhero films since 2000 by contrasting dollars earned in ticket sales prior to and since that year, illustrating that superhero films of the past twelve years have earned more than three times as much as during the twenty-one years prior.

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cookware. Among these, novels and, in particular, video games, are likely avenues through which superheroes may communicate aesthetic intensity. However, those media are topics for another study.

<sup>45</sup>I make this clarification in case the comparison of films and cartoons implies a targeting of childhood audiences. That said, cartoons are not necessarily aimed at children either.

**Graph 8: Domestic ticket sales for licensed superhero films since 1978 (USD adjusted)**



These data, collected from websites [BoxOfficeMojo.com](http://BoxOfficeMojo.com) and [the-numbers.com](http://the-numbers.com)<sup>46</sup>, agree with the data presented in Graph 7, which illustrated that the number of superhero films made in the 2000s more than tripled the number made in any decade previous, and more films logically indicates more earnings. In addition, five of the superhero films produced after 2000 have become among the highest-earning films of all-time. As Bart Beaty asserts, “Hollywood summer blockbuster films such as *X-Men* in 2000 and *Spider-Man* in 2002

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<sup>46</sup> The two websites are independent of each other and present the same data. I have not verified the details of their data-collection methods.

cemented the superhero as the predominant staple of Hollywood summer blockbusters through to this day, and reignited interest in the comics on which they were based” (Beaty 2010, 205, emphasis added).

The increase in the number of superhero films made and the number of people seeing superhero films since 2000 both support my perception that superheroes have gained newfound popularity since that year, and I discuss the melodramatic content and aesthetic intensity of these films, to which I attribute some of their success in chapters five and six, respectively. However, as with the case of comic sales, further consideration of these data is necessary. For instance, the dollars earned through ticket-sales, though greatly increased over the decades, do not account for facts such as increased ticket prices, the number of theatres available for movies to play in, or the ever-increasing budgets of Hollywood films. Indeed, when adjusting for something as basic as inflation, one of the websites that collects and reports these data lists *Gone With the Wind* as having the all-time highest gross earnings from ticket-sales, with the highest-ranked superhero film coming in at number 27. In addition, if one compares actual tickets sold instead of dollars earned, further contradictions arise. For example, the first *Superman* film from 1978 earned over \$134 million by selling over 57 million tickets, while the 2006 film *Superman Returns* earned just over \$200 million while selling just under 31 million tickets – roughly 16 million fewer tickets; the 1989 *Batman* film earned \$251 million selling almost 63 million tickets, whereas the most recent film of the latest *Batman*-inspired film-trilogy, 2012’s *The Dark Knight Rises*, earned \$448 million but sold only 58 million tickets. Clearly, the proposition that superheroes have achieved new levels or

new kinds of popularity is no simpler to defend with reference to movie ticket-sales than it is with reference to comic-sales. How, then, to correlate my impression of increased popularity, with the data I have just reviewed?

### **Autoethnographic interpretation: in retrospect...**

Though it may be difficult to claim newfound popularity for superheroes, it is less difficult to defend the claim that something new has happened to the superhero genre which, in some way, involves them having a larger presence in the everyday experiences of most adult north Americans. In retrospect, I believe the impression I had of increased popularity of the genre was actually an observation of a new kind of proliferation of the figure of the superhero, one that pulled him out of his traditional cultural spaces – comics and cartoons aimed at children – and into new cultural spaces intended to appeal to adults. My *Seinfeld* experience, detailed in the Introduction, was the first in a series of encounters I had with superheroes in mainstream entertainment, all of which occurred some years prior to their debut in popular, blockbuster films. I touch on a few more such experiences here.

### **Superheroes on television**

Not long after discovering Jerry Seinfeld's appreciation of Superman, I learned that Quentin Tarantino, the film writer and director who achieved fame for the non-superhero film *Pulp Fiction* (1994), was putting similar references in some of his films that had no overt relation to the superhero genre. In one short scene of *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), a grim and occasionally

gruesome gangster film, we see that the protagonist, an undercover policeman trying to infiltrate a gang of thieves, has various superhero posters around his apartment. In *Crimson Tide* (1995), a thriller about mutiny aboard a US Navy nuclear submarine, the central character, played by serious and lauded actor Denzel Washington, spends four minutes trying to bolster the confidence of a young crewman by discussing the nuances of *Silver Surfer* comics from the 1960s. Much later, in Tarantino's martial-arts vengeance film *Kill Bill Volume 2* (2004), the titular character relies on the trope of the superhero secret identity to expound his views of the human condition in one of the film's climactic moments. In 2000, I was again shocked by a mainstream Hollywood film called *Unbreakable*. The theatrical trailers for *Unbreakable* had been somewhat inscrutable, presenting a man in a hospital who is told he is the only survivor of train-wreck that killed hundreds of others, and a voice-over speaking of that man's destiny. The film appeared to be a supernatural thriller along the same lines as the director's previous hit, *The Sixth Sense* (1999). No special-effects, colorful costumes or other tropes of the superhero genre were evident in that trailer, and so I was completely surprised when the film opened with simple white text on a black background, providing numerous statistics about comics and comic collectors. The story turned out to concern a completely original (non-licensed) character who learns he is incredibly strong, invulnerable to physical harm and can sense criminal danger, thanks to the machinations of

someone who can only be described as a supervillain. The film contains very few special effects, no real costumes<sup>47</sup> and very few spectacular super-feats. Nevertheless, the film was clearly intended as a kind of love-letter to the superhero genre and to comic collectors, striking out a somewhat original path just before the start of an unprecedented deluge of Hollywood licensed-superhero films.

Around this time, the early 2000s, I also became aware of superheroes being used in entirely new ways on television. Though a crop of new superhero-centered programs were still some years away, references to superheroes were cropping up on existing programs that were not superheroic in nature. As I argue in chapters four and five, superheroes share common ground with another popular media product, soap operas, in that both are strongly melodramatic. But in early the early 2000s, superheroes and soap operas merged in new ways. In 2005, an episode of the prime-time, youth-oriented soap opera-style program called *The O.C.* reenacted a scene from the 2001 *Spider-Man* film, with one character hanging upside from a room, wearing a full Spider-Man costume. In 2007, perennial daytime soap *The Guiding Light* presented a story-arc in which a regular character temporarily gained extraordinary powers and became a superhero, costume and heroic deeds included. Lasting only one episode, the story nonetheless broke new ground by presenting superhero

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<sup>47</sup> In somewhat subtle nods to superhero tropes and to comic fandom, the villain's wardrobe choices centre on green and purple, traditional villain-colors within the superhero genre; he also owns a comic store.

adventures within the context of a daytime, adult-aimed, dramatic program with no other ties to the superhero genre.

Superheroes were being referenced in other genre programming as well. In 2001, the situation comedy *Friends* featured a costume party at which one central character appeared as Supergirl, and another as Catwoman. The costumes were referenced several times throughout the episode, including one instance where another character claimed to read superhero comics exclusively, and gave opinions on which of the two characters would win in a fight. In 2006, *30 Rock* briefly featured a character called Greenzo, a superhero with powers related to environmental preservation. Though Greenzo was fictional even within the world of *30 Rock*, former US Vice-president and environmentalist Al Gore made a guest-appearance on the program and claimed to have the superpower of hearing whales in distress. Though this reference to superheroes did not deploy as many generic tropes as did the *Guiding Light* story, it was nonetheless shocking for me to watch a former US Vice-president refer to his superpower and briefly, if comedically, act like a superhero rushing off to save someone. Later, in 2007, another costume-party related storyline on the dramatic program *Bones* had the central character, a forensic doctor, appearing in a Wonder Woman costume for almost 15 minutes of an episode. Perhaps the instance I found most bizarre was the choice by producers of the Canadian comedy program *Corner Gas* to package the DVD collection of its third season (2005) in a case covered by rather goofy-looking cartoon drawings of all the characters in superhero costumes. It was bizarre because, though I have not watched that season in its entirety, the program has nothing to do with the superhero, or

any other fantastic, genre. It seems possible that the choice was made in light of recognition of the proliferation of superheroes into new cultural spaces that was ongoing at the time.

### **Super-marketing**

That proliferation also involved the field of marketing and advertisement, as commercials began using superheroes to market products. Though superheroes have long been used to advertise toys, candy and other products aimed at children, I found during the same period that they were suddenly being used to advertise products to adults. As with the television programs just discussed, in many cases there was no obvious link between superheroes and the products being sold. In many cases, it seems, superheroes had been selected because they were seen as an avenue through which to reach adults. I provide some examples, and then provide some interpretation of this trend.

The scene: a woman on a dark city street cries out for help, and is answered by a plethora of Marvel superheroes. Thor raises his mystic hammer and screams, bringing thunder and lightning; Spider-Man drops from a web-line, crouching on the roof of a nearby car; and Captain America uses his shield to break upwards through the thick sidewalk pavement. They, along with six lesser-known Marvel characters, assemble in front of the woman and strike dramatic poses prepared to fight, but are disappointed to learn she had only lost her Visa card. As the thunder, winds and orchestral score suddenly disappear, Captain America shakes his head in disgust and Spider-Man, in a high-pitched voice clearly intended to convey whiny irritation, informs the woman of the card's security features.

Having been called for nothing, the superheroes turn to leave as a narrator insists that the card is “super super safe”.

This commercial for the Visa credit card, which aired on television in 2005-6 (but remains viewable on the YouTube website), begins very dramatically, deploying loud and striking special effects, stunt-work and breakaway sets, and an orchestral score. But, very quickly, this ambience is shattered and the heroes are revealed as somewhat ridiculous. Captain America’s cowl and costume are too large for his narrow and chinless face; Wolverine’s claws flex and bend, clearly rubber; and with his squeaky voice and large ears Spider-Man leaves the impression of a 13-year old in a Halloween costume. When confronted with the mundane but real protection afforded by Visa’s security protocols, the rubber and plastic clad heroes cannot but seem exaggerated, silly, and finally superfluous. While the superheroes are the most distinctive part of the ad, acting as visual and narrative anchors for Visa’s message of personal security and safety, this commercial treats them as a joke rather than a serious cipher or effective story-telling device in their own right. That is the common thread in the advertisements I examine in this section: they rely on some superhero tropes to attract audience attention, but ultimately treat superheroes as a winking joke, presuming their audiences will agree that superheroes can be little more than two-dimensional, somewhat ridiculous figures.

Another credit card, American Express, also took a humorous, if perhaps less ridiculous approach to using superheroes in their advertisements. In 2004, they aired a series of television commercials in which Jerry Seinfeld was shown ‘hanging out’ with Superman

(drawn in cartoon form in otherwise live-action ads) in various settings. The two would engage in humorous dialogue and then get into some kind of jam that Seinfeld would solve using his credit card, while lightly mocking Superman's inability to save the day. These ads featured no super-feats at all, choosing instead to emphasize the friendly banter between the superhero and his friend. The ads were cut from longer films that can still be watched online (Unknown 2004). They eschew the silliness of the Visa ad, and retain their entertaining quality even as they soft-sell the features of an American Express credit card.

Beginning approximately in 2003 and over the course of several years, one of Canada's national lotteries, Lotto Super 7, deployed superheroes for radio, television and internet promotions. Each of the "Super Seven Heroes" – 2 Weeks Notice Man, Relaxo, The Splurger, Cosmetica, Jesse Streets, Professor Posh, The Destinator – wore a gaudy, caped and/or masked costume and had a special 'power' which helped lottery winners spend their winnings. 2 Weeks Notice Man, truthfully one of the most original superheroes I have seen in decades, was a senior citizen in brown leather who helped new winners quit their job in style. Jesse Streets not only helped winners buy an expensive car, but sprayed them with champagne every time they 'crossed the finish line' into their driveway. While the Super Seven Heroes were less ridiculous than the Marvel heroes in the Visa ad, they were clearly intended to amuse rather than impress audiences. Their costumes, hair-dos, accessories and

theme-music intentionally invoked a 1960s-70s, kitschy aesthetic<sup>48</sup>, adding an over-the-top ‘cheesiness’ to another campaign clearly intended to appeal to audiences considered by advertisers as ‘in on the joke’ of how silly superheroes are.

Ridicule was certainly the approach taken in a series of commercials for Listerine that presented two grown men dressed in full costumes as a toothbrush and a bottle of the mouthwash. The series began by presenting the human toothbrush, actually someone hired to distribute pamphlets about the importance of brushing to passers-by on the street. We see that he is a rather bored man just doing a job, until he is joined by an intense, serious and somewhat strange ‘volunteer’ working hard to inform pedestrians about the added benefits of Listerine in the fight against ‘the evil Gingivitis’. Where the human toothbrush was lackadaisical about his task, the human Listerine bottle presents a kind of fervor in his mission that quickly inspires the toothbrush to greater action, and future commercials show them working together in different contexts to highlight the importance of brushing and rinsing (at one point they refuse membership in their club to a human dental-floss dispenser). The superhero elements are somewhat less marked in this series of commercials than in the Visa ad, as there are no licensed characters, no action or dramatic sequences, and the costumes, rather than the usual tight spandex or rubber affairs, resembled solid cardboard constructions like those at grade-school talent shows. The commercial did feature

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<sup>48</sup> In terms of superhero products, obvious examples are the *Batman* and *Wonder Woman* television programs, which I discuss in chapter four.

quick-cut camera-work that 'froze' the main characters in over-the-top, silly dramatic combat poses – imagine Pee Wee Herman's face as he tries to perform Kung Fu – as they prepared to fight 'evil gingivitis'. As in the Lotto Super 7 commercials, brassy, bouncy 70s-styled trumpets accented the upbeat, and ultimately ridiculous, feel of the commercial.

The most abstract deployment of the superhero in a television commercial came in the winter of 2007-8. There were no costumes, dramatic effects or evil villains. A woman at the office is fighting a cold, and every time she coughs or sneezes the sound is onomatopoeically reproduced on the screen in a colourful starburst clearly reminiscent of the technique used on the 1960s *Batman* television show, but with 'Bam!' and 'Pow!' replaced by 'Cough!' and 'Honk!'. Background music is again in a 1970s style, this time based on the theme music from the *Wonder Woman* program, but instead of 'Wonder Woman' the female lead-vocalist (backed up by other female voices) sings about a 'super woman'. But the salutary lyrics get covered over as a male voice-over begins talking 'to' the woman we watch, telling her she doesn't have to try and be perfect, that she can and should take a day off to "FIGHT off your cold". After some close-ups of the product, we return to the woman, home in bed with some magazines, still red-nosed but clearly happier with her situation: as she 'sighs' back into her pillow, that 'sound effect' appears on the screen. There is an enemy to fight, but in this case the battle is best won reclining in bed and the superwoman is super because she's smart enough to know that.

The final instance of super-marketing I will describe involves the 18-wheel delivery trucks used by President's Choice, a Canadian food and home-product distributor which,

beginning in 2005-6, branded those trucks with their own superhero. Stretching the entire 53 foot length and 14 foot height of each side of the trailer, the figure was a male with blue-ish hair, wearing a small domino-style mask and blue, red and white costume with a 'PC' shield on the chest and a red cape. Drawn in heavily cartoonish style, he appeared to be flying up and out of the trailer while holding a can of PC Cola and waving. There was no other superhero-themed advertising at Loblaws, the main vendor for President's Choice products, so it is difficult to estimate precisely why or how the company thought a superhero would help its marketing. However, the stylized 'PC' that adorns many of their products was a good fit for the space that, on many superhero costumes, would display a hero's icon or symbol. In some cases those simple icons – Superman's stylized 'S', Batman's black bat on a yellow oval – are as recognizable as or more recognizable than the characters themselves, whose looks can vary wildly from one iteration to the next. With this campaign, President's Choice was clearly interested in capitalizing on that aspect of superhero-trope recognizeability, even if no other similarly-themed advertisements ever appeared from that corporation.

These are some of the instances of super-marketing that I noticed over the past decade. There have been others, but, looking back I now realize around 2010, I stopped noticing super-marketing. Recently, a new crop of television, print and billboard ads for Interac have debuted, also featuring superheroes (the message being that Interac allows normal people to accomplish everyday tasks with 'super ease'), reminding me of the trend of which I had stopped taking much notice. It is possible that the trend diminished over the last

three or four years; I have not attempted a systematic survey of recent commercials, and so am not sure. But it is also possible that I ceased being impressed or surprised by these occurrences and began taking them for granted. The latter case fits with my general impression that the appearance of superheroes in 'new places' is in fact less new than it was when I began work on this dissertation, to the effect that it is no longer surprising, even for a fan such as myself, to find superheroes referenced passingly as part of mainstream, everyday culture. That would indicate that their period of proliferation may be at an end, in that they have 'accomplished' penetration of, and implanting into, the everyday lexicon of mainstream culture. That, at least, is the impression I now have after having considered this topic for some years.

The proliferation of superheroes has led to their use in ads aimed at adult markets for whom superheroes had never before been considered appropriate marketing devices. The fact of superhero appearances in 'grown-up' marketing is an interesting enough phenomenon since it is, for the most part, a completely novel one. However, a further important analytical distinction can be made by distinguishing different uses of superheroes as marketing tools. Many advertisements follow the pattern of the examples discussed above in what can be called a 'shallow deployment' of superheroes, mainly as a way to convey a wink to audiences, as if everyone is sharing a joke related to the gaudy silliness of the kitschy superhero. However, some advertisers engage in a 'robust deployment of superheroes, using superhero tropes in a more committed, sincere fashion than a conspirational wink can achieve and, importantly, thereby attaining some measure of aesthetic intensity that, I claim,

is part of the superhero genre. Rather than discuss examples of such 'robust super-marketing' here, I return to it in chapter six, after having elaborated my understanding of aesthetic intensity.

## **Conclusion**

Superheroes have existed since June, 1938, but since the early 2000s they have proliferated into new cultural spaces and been put to new uses entirely novel for the genre. Despite the material reality of low comic-book sales, superheroes have in recent years made new and greater claims on the imagination of the north American population in general, as evidenced by a wide number of successful superhero films and, it seems to me most importantly, by the increased 'casual' uses they have been put to in non-superhero-based entertainment and marketing for adults. Superheroes may not have a larger 'fan base' now than they have in the past, but it certainly seems that they have occupied the non-fan lexicon and cultural awareness in ways they had not prior to around 2000.

# 3 Continuity, Iteration and Seriality

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Within the long history of the comics-medium, superhero comics are set apart from most other kinds of comics<sup>49</sup> in their particular way of responding to and making use of that long history: the regular reinvention of the character of the superhero. As genre fiction, superhero comics rely on characters who must be, first and foremost, familiar to readers. This familiarity is not limited to the visual; rather, the characters must behave consistently as well as occupy worlds that also present recognizable features. At the same time, however, comic creators who want to keep readers coming back must constantly come up with new stories, new challenges for the heroes to face. When inserting these new elements into the familiar, comic creators are always faced with a conundrum: how to retain the familiar and make it new at the same time.

The navigation of this boundary, and its expression in the comics that result, is a complex process I examine in this chapter by paying attention to some of the important structural changes that have taken place within the superhero genre since its inception. These structural changes relate primarily, first, to the shifting seriality of story-telling within superhero comics and, second, to the changing relationship of superheroes stories

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<sup>49</sup> There are non-superhero comics that have also relied on the regular reinvention of familiar animated characters. Archie, the Disney characters and Asterix have all undergone some modicum of visual and character-based change in their decades of existence. My argument is not that superhero comics are the only example of this phenomenon among comics, but rather that they are one very good and interesting example that bears further analysis.

with their own internal history. In short, I argue that by the late 1990s, the superhero genre had become sufficiently serialized and sufficiently ‘handy’ at playing with its own history that it was able to deploy what I call superdrama<sup>50</sup>, a key ingredient in enhancing the aesthetic intensity of the genre.

But understanding superdrama requires some familiarity with the history of the superhero genre and the changes it has undergone over time. In this chapter I catalogue these changes by linking certain key attributes with particular periods<sup>51</sup> of that history, periods I have labeled *oneiric*, *continuity* and *iterative*. I also examine another related change in the medium, the shift from episodic to serialized storytelling. I rely on a number of different conceptual frameworks to make sense of those periods and their structural properties, including theories taken from literary studies, cinema and sociology, including the Actor Network-based monograph *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Bowker and Star 2000). These various approaches allow me to explore superhero continuity, iteration and seriality as elements of the genre that were critical to its eventual shift into the realm of the superdramatic, the central property that led to the mainstream popularity of the superhero.

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<sup>50</sup> The following two chapters present my arguments concerning superdrama.

<sup>51</sup> Periodization has an extensive, controversial and sometimes tiring history with the superhero genre, reflected most often in debates over how to separate so-called Golden, Silver, Bronze, Iron, Neo-silver and other ‘Ages’. It is not my intention to engage with those debates in any way, or to introduce the categories *oneiric*, *continuity* and *iterative* to supplant those ‘Ages’. Further, I do not claim that these categories have precise boundaries of any kind or that they can be used reliably to classify every superhero story. I am trying only to highlight broad differences that can be observed when considering ‘average’ superhero stories from different periods which can, in rough manner, be distinguished.

## The Oneiric Climate of Episodic Comics

The earliest superhero comics were told primarily within an episodic or ‘single play’ framework in which each story began and ended within that issue and was meant to be consumed in one sitting. Comics<sup>2</sup> of the 1930s and 40s often contained multiple, discrete stories and one Superman comic likely contained at least two separate Superman stories with nothing linking them beyond the central character and possibly some supporting characters, making each story one complete, self-contained episode or single-play. This is what Glen Creeber terms a “closed narrative,” because the characters’ possible experiences were confined entirely to each single narrative, with clear ‘start’ and ‘end’ boundaries to that narrative and no reference to other previous or forthcoming narratives. Characters did not ‘grow’ in the sense of accruing personal histories because they were essentially ‘reset to zero’ at the beginning of each story.

This aspect of superhero comics was the focus of Umberto Eco’s “The Myth of Superman” (Eco 2004), one of the earliest attempts at serious analysis of the superhero genre or the comic structure. In it, Eco points out that a major difficulty faced by the creators of Superman (and, by extension, creators of many other superhero stories), is that Superman must be both the “inconsumable” (Eco 2004, 147) mythic hero, and a character who consumes

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<sup>2</sup> For the remainder of this chapter, ‘comics’ refers to comic-books, not strips. Though some superheroes, including Superman and, later, Spider-Man, were featured in serialized comic-strips even as their comic-books gained or lost popularity, my focus remains on the comic-books, not the strips.

himself with each day he lives. Superman must possess immutable heroic qualities such as youth, strength and vigour, while *also* living in a world in which time operates more or less as it does in the real world. So though Superman should be aging and gaining experiences with each passing story, he must nevertheless remain recognizably young and retain the immutable qualities of the traditional mythic hero. Eco argues that the solution of creators at the time was stories that “develop in a kind of oneiric climate – of which the reader is not aware at all – where what has 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” (Eco 2004, 153). Thus, whereas certain Superman-story details remain inviolate (Clark Kent came from Krypton, has a secret identity and battles an enemy named Lex Luthor), other ‘truths’ are multiple, often with contradictory manifestations within the comic’s long history (in what year did Clark’s ship land on earth? How old is Superman? Is anyone aware of his secret identity? Was Luthor evil even as a child, or were he and Clark childhood friends?). In the oneiric climate of superhero comics of the 1940s, 50s and early 1960s, details such as these often remained unclear, rarely displaying logical connections and occasionally seeming to contradict one another. Operating within the logic of Eco’s oneiric climate, the stories acted mostly independent of one another, and thus constituted parts of a series, rather than chapters in one ongoing, serialized story. Thus, comic-books became commonly referred to as composing ‘series’ rather than serials.

Around the time Eco wrote his piece, the facets of the oneiric climate – how time passes, how different ‘episodes’ or issues are linked, what happens ‘between’ those episodes – were beginning to shift into new, different kinds of relationships with one another. Around the mid-1960s, the oneiric climate was being slowly replaced by *continuity*. But in order to discuss continuity, one must first understand another change that began to occur in superhero comics around the same time.

## Continuity and Iteration

In superhero comics, the shift from episodic, or ‘series’ story-telling, to serialized story-telling happened slowly, over decades, and began in earnest during the early 1960s, in Marvel’s superhero comics. While series operate through what Glen Creeber calls closed narrative (2004), serials operate through open narratives: “the conventions borrowed from continuous genres like soap opera often allow a narrative complexity to be introduced to television fiction in a way that was perhaps impossible to conceive in terms of the single play... its ability to construct ‘open’ rather than ‘closed’ narrative forms” (Creeber 2004, 4) Or, as Jennifer Poole Hayward (1997) puts it, a serial is

an ongoing narrative released in successive parts. In addition to these defining qualities, serial narratives share elements that might be termed, after Wittgenstein, family resemblances. These include refusal of closure; intertwined subplots; large casts of characters... interaction with current political, social or cultural issues; dependence on profit; and acknowledgement of audience response (this has become increasingly explicit, even institutionalized within the form, over time) (Hayward 1997, 3)

As Hayward implies, one of the characteristics of the serial form is its expanded story-telling across multiple instances or sittings, relative to the single-play or episode whose entire or every plot is intended to be consumed in one sitting.

Marvel's early superhero comics, in particular *The Fantastic Four* by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, and *The Amazing Spider-Man* by Lee and Steve Ditko, were not fully serialized in that they were almost never 'ongoing narrative released in successive parts'. Rather, they were self-contained stories with references to details in earlier issues, as well as small character details that were referenced over and over again (such as Spider-Man's constant brooding over his bad 'Parker luck', Mr. Fantastic's tendency to ignore his wife while brooding over his work, or the Thing's brooding over his monstrous appearance).<sup>53</sup> But unlike the oneiric climate in which earlier superhero stories occurred, these repetitions and references were meant to provide audiences with a strong 'line' through the individual stories, details that would remind audiences that the characters had consistent, perhaps 'lifelike' personalities and could become familiar friends, rather than mysterious enigmas with no clear connection to their own histories or the audience's past consumption. This was, in effect, the source of continuity, which becomes relevant only when the characters and worlds of connected stories accrue their own history over time.

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<sup>53</sup> Brooding was an important element of Marvel's superhero comics, both in that it featured prominently among Marvel characters and in that it was an essential ingredient for increasing the stories' melodramatic qualities – as I discuss in later chapters.

In comics parlance, 'continuity' refers both to the history of the universe(s) existing within a story or groups of related stories ('history' generally refers to real-world events linked to particular stories) and to the internal consistency of that history. In practice, the term is usually employed to point out a problem, potential problem or point of confusion about that history. A problem in continuity may be as small as an artist mistakenly drawing a character in different clothes from one panel to the next; or, it may concern a character acting in two very different and incompatible ways in two different comics; or, as with Eco's oneiric climate, it may raise the question of how a 30-year old character who interacted with U.S. President Roosevelt during World War II could also be a 30-year old character interacting with Barack Obama in 2011. While such problems seem to have garnered little attention during the first few decades of superhero stories, concern with the elements of continuity became common among consumers and creators of the superhero genre around the end of the 1950s and early 1960s.

In large measure, superhero fans were a driving force behind the search for consistent continuity. In *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (1999), Matthew J. Pustz charts the growth of superhero fandom from loosely-organized fan-clubs in the early 1940s, through self-published 'fanzines' and fan-organized comic conventions in the 1960s to contemporary, professionally organized conventions and online discussion-groups. The growth of this culture was supported in part by comic publishers who, beginning with publisher EC Comics in the 1950s, printed at the back of some comic-books letters mailed in by readers. Pustz argues that this was implemented by publishers in order to foster a sense of "insiderism -

making readers feel like they were part of an exclusive group” (Pustz 1999, 40). As one would expect, many of the published letters sang unmitigated praise of previous comics and their favorite characters. However, Pustz points out that one of the distinctive features of Marvel’s earliest superhero comics was their constant requests not just for reader letters, but for suggestions and even critical commentary as well. Prefiguring current commercial obsessions with ‘hearing from’ consumers through surveys, focus-groups, emails and the internet, Marvel comics creators were unsurpassed in the field in requesting and publishing feedback from their fans. Eventually DC, which came quickly to trail Marvel in sales after Marvel began publishing superhero comics, realized the importance of printing and responding to reader letters, and by the mid-1960s most of both publishers’ superhero comics featured letter-columns. Though letter-columns have never been comprehensively reviewed or analyzed, my own informal and intermittent reviews of letter-columns support what has become common knowledge in comic-fandom circles: for every glowing review, angry criticism, request for change or other feedback printed in superhero comics letter-columns, one finds another letter focused on questions, confusions or outright accusations concerning conflicted continuity.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> I am aware of the problems associated with stipulating ‘common knowledge’ (or ‘sense’) or anecdotal evidence as a basis for further analysis. However, undertaking the comprehensive review of letter-columns that would provide ‘evidence’ is beyond the scope of this project.

By the 1960s it seemed that many, if not most people who consumed superhero comics and wrote letters to publishers, found continuity contradictions to be disruptive of their consumptive practice. It is as if continuity contradictions eventually stretched Eco's oneiric climate past the breaking point, forcing the reader out of the dreamy, vague enjoyment of the oneiric state's 'fuzzy' organization and into a state of hyper-awareness of and concern with minute details and logical and coherent story-telling (albeit within a fantasy-based framework). That is one possible explanation of the shift from an oneiric framework into a continuity framework; another is that comic audiences were no longer comprised mainly of children and US soldiers serving overseas during wartime, but of increasing numbers of college students who were perhaps more willing and able to remember and analyze discrepancies within their chosen form of entertainment.

It is important to recognize that, though continuity was typically only addressed by fans in terms of problems or errors, this attention – whether expressed through letters to the publisher, at burgeoning comic conventions or at smaller, informal gatherings – was one way that those fans derived particular kinds of aesthetically intense experiences from their hobby. Indeed, for some fans, spotting errors and inventing plausible explanations for them became a fun sideline to reading comics. This was noticed in the 1960s and then supported by Marvel

comics editorial staff who encouraged this feedback by awarding the “Coveted No-Prize” (a signed certificate) to readers with the most creative explanations for continuity errors.

By the late 1970s the parallel trend within superhero comics, toward increasingly serialized storytelling, was also taking on new dimensions.<sup>55</sup> One writer in particular, Chris Claremont, is widely seen as having increased acceptance of serialized storytelling among audiences through his long tenure on Marvel’s comics about the X-Men, a team of mutants that, though heroic, were nonetheless feared and shunned by most ‘normal’ humans.<sup>56</sup> Though that theme had been part of X-Men stories since their creation by Stan Lee in 1963, Claremont increased the importance of mutants as a feared minority or a kind of underclass, with respect to their monthly battles against evil. Claremont and the artists he worked with, in particular John Byrne, also chose to focus on character-development as much as, or more than plot, resulting in comics in which X-Men would have long, drawn-out discussions about their feelings, disagreements, fears, and other details not necessary to tell a simple tale of heroes vanquishing villains. As Grant Morrison puts it, Claremont and his collaborators mobilized

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<sup>55</sup> As Jenkins puts it, “[s]omewhere in the early 1970s, this focus on self-contained stories shifts towards more and more serialization as the distribution of comics becomes more reliable... [the] principle of continuity operates not just within any individual book but also across all of the books by a particular publisher” (Jenkins 2009, 20).

<sup>56</sup> Claremont is hardly the only creator in the genre to have made this stylistic move. There were others, among whom Marv Wolfman and Paul Levitz are also widely recognized as innovators with this form. But since the kinds of changes implemented were more or less the same across the different creators (as far as is necessary to consider for my arguments), I focus on Claremont and the X-Men comics for simplicity’s sake.

detailed scene setting, combined with an ever-open window into the ongoing thoughts of every single character, [which] gave the comic a texture that was sticky like flypaper. It was impossible not to get caught up in the perfectly crafted, maddeningly compelling soap opera twists, turns, and shocking cliff-hangers... In *X-Men*, everyone was someone's father, long lost brother, evil twin, estranged lover, mother, wife, or descendant from the future... [Claremont's] dedication to his characters was legendary and allowed him to weave nightmarishly convoluted but internally consistent tapestry, or 'canon', as he referred to it (Morrison 2011, 177)

Sometimes this attention to character detail left less space in each comic to tell the 'central' story – termed 'the A plot', involving fights and bad guys – and that story was extended across multiple issues, resulting in a kind of serialization. More often, however, the A-plot wrapped up within just a few issues and it was the B- or C-plots, the character-related storylines, which continued across issues.

As I discuss in the following chapters, these changes also opened the door for more melodramatic possibilities within the genre, since heroes no longer fought only with villains, but, mimicking television melodramas such as soap operas, had conflicts within their own 'family' as well. For the moment, what I want to highlight is that this further embracing of seriality reinforced both the presence of and the desire for continuity within the genre. As well, increased seriality further degraded the oneiric climate that had existed within the genre as long as single-issue stories dominated, and as long as the connection between those issues had remained fuzzy. The more that characters accrued personal histories through stories stretching across issues, the less fuzzy those connections could be and the more distracting, or disruptive, contradictions and errors became to the reader's experience. Further, because the series were not often composed of fully serialized stories – that is, the

stories being told were connected but different, rather than one story told in multiple parts – the reader was now confronted with the possibility that the characters’ lives were going on even between the issues, in the gaps of time left between one issue and the next.<sup>57</sup> Thus, inconsistencies or discrepancies within a series or serialized story become magnified, since the reader’s understanding of the characters and their development is now explicitly predicated on the assumption that this development is consistent from month to month, not ‘fuzzy’ any longer. As a result, continuity both asserted itself more and more fully in the genre and could be demanded more and more loudly from its audience.

### **Continuity begins to break down: retcons**

Having published its first superhero comic in 1939, by the 1960s the continuity of DC comics was a mess. While its most famous characters, Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, had decades of stories behind them, they interacted with many other characters who had been around only a few years and, most problematically, all of these characters were meant to share the same world and timeline. In order to explain how Superman and Wonder Woman, who had fought Nazis and fifth columnists, could appear to be the same age as the Flash and Aquaman who were both created in the late 1950s, creators at DC invoked an ‘alternate Earths’ story-device through which any contradictory events within DC continuity had

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<sup>57</sup> As I return to in the following chapter, Ien Ang argues convincingly that this is an essential characteristic of melodrama.

actually taken place in separate but very similar parallel dimensions or universes. But, a kind of Pandora's Box, once the alternate-earth device was invented, DC creators seemed unable to resist returning to it to explain every newly-discovered inconsistency or simply as a resource for fresh story ideas.<sup>58</sup> As a result, by the early 1980s the DC universe had become known as a multiverse in order to acknowledge the dozens, possibly hundreds of parallel universes it contained. DC's continuity had thus become hugely complex and largely incoherent, a fact bemoaned by fans in many letter-columns, at comic conventions and through other venues. Individual creators occasionally tried to simplify 'their corner' of DC continuity, but these attempts only added confusion when other creators failed to incorporate them.

In 1985, DC attempted something new to solve its continuity problems, announcing a 12-issue 'maxi series'<sup>59</sup> called *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (Wolfman and Pérez 1985-86) that would tackle continuity problems across the entire DC multiverse, rather than one character at a time. *Crisis* was a large undertaking featuring almost every important character that had ever appeared in a DC comic and, by the story's end, every alternate Earth created or implied by DC creators had been destroyed, leaving behind only one Earth within a DC uni-, not

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<sup>58</sup> Alternate-Earths also allowed for occasional 'cross-over' stories in which the heroes of different earths teamed up, and readers could enjoy hints at, if not explorations of, puzzles such as which Superman was stronger, which Flash was faster, and so on.

<sup>59</sup> The term is a play on 'mini-series', a label already in use in the industry and recognizable to audiences as an indication that this series had a projected end. Calling *Crisis* a maxi-series allowed DC to 'brag' about the larger length of this series as well as its importance to the DC 'multiverse'.

multiverse. This spatial reconstruction was accompanied by the creation of a new 'official' history for the single universe. In some cases, characters that had previously existed on different Earths were now known to have lived in different times on the same Earth. In other cases, characters (minor ones) had their 'histories' completely changed or even erased from the newly imposed 'official' history. In effect, this process was very similar to what fans had been doing for years: deciding retroactively that events that had taken place within DC stories were now considered not to have taken place.

Around this time an editor at DC wrote publicly about the process DC was engaged in with *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, calling it 'retcon', or 'retroactive continuity'. The retcon, alternately referred to as retconning or retcons, marked a new kind of relationship between superhero stories and continuity. Until that point, attempts to establish 'official' continuities for specific characters had always necessarily been piecemeal – focused on just one character or a small set of characters – and, most importantly, only forward-looking. That is, operating somewhat within the older logic of Eco's oneiric climate, attempts to impose a new continuity had always been of the form 'starting now and here on in...', effectively ignoring what had come before as unimportant, weightless, 'fuzzy' and with no impact on the present. Retcons introduced the idea that the past (inside the comics) has weight, solidity, force, and must therefore be acknowledged in the face of revision, rather than ignored. By marking an end-point of one 'biography' of the DC universe (multiverse) and the beginning of a new *History of the DC Universe* (Wolfman and Pérez 1986) – a comic that described the new official history in detail – creators were, for the first time, expressing an acknowledgement

that what audiences had known and loved in the past was, in some register, true or 'real', even as they worked to wipe some of that away and replace it with reimagined versions.

Retcons were, then, an early step out of the framework of strict continuity that had been growing in the genre since the 1960s, because the retcons introduced by *Crisis on Infinite Earths* created a new iteration of the DC multi/universe, rather than continuing the status-quo of previous decades. This movement away from continuity and toward iteration was reinforced through another device, the reboot.

### **Full Serialization**

In order to discuss the reboot, it is necessary to pause here and again note a change in the serialization of superhero comics that took place around this time, roughly the early 1980s. At this stage, many mainstream superhero comics shifted into what might be called full serialization, in which single stories began to be told entirely over multiple (more than two or three) issues, with each issue being labeled as one part of the larger whole. This shift, the introduction of what came to be called 'story arcs', did not happen all at once, either at the level of the genre or within particular titles. But the shift can be said to have started in the early 1980s and has grown to the extent that, in recent years, superhero stories told in just one issue have become rare exceptions. Broadly speaking, this final shift into full serialization had two important consequences for the genre and for audiences.

First, fully serialized superhero stories opened more space for creators to tell stories driven by characters and their interactions as well as plot, rather than just plot. Compared to

single-issue stories and the somewhat serialized comics of the 1970s and early 1980s, the additional story-telling space of fully serialized, multi-part stories allows creators not only to present a more slowly and/or richly developed plot, but to add more details not directly connected to the plot that add color and depth to the story. Serialized story 'arcs' are a final refutation of the oneiric climate since, within their self-contained narrative (when properly executed), every element of the story is clearly defined, self-consistent and forward-moving – no haziness remains. Of course, between story-arcs some haziness may remain, and, as I argue below, has come to be dealt with quite frequently through iteration. But the opportunity to tell 'expanded' or 'decompressed' stories, as they have come to be known, allowed superhero comic creators to develop superheroes in new ways – most importantly, as I argue in the following chapters, in directions allowing for stories that operate more within a melodramatic mode and are not as confined to the action/adventure mode as they had been.

The second important consequence of increased serialization was that, as individual issues became subsumed into a larger whole, they also became less appealing to new readers. It is always difficult and rarely pleasurable to enter a story mid-way through, but full serialization presented exactly that scenario to anyone hoping to 'jump on board' a particular title at a time of their choosing. The idea of comics, of superhero stories, as something fun and light anyone could simply pick up for a relatively small investment was, to some degree, crushed under the weight of full serialization. Indeed, this was one of the rationalizations put forth by comics publishers in the early 2000s for the industry's 'crash' of 1996: superhero comics could no longer attract new readers. But this was not attributed solely to

serialization; the other contributing factor was argued to be the decades of continuity with which readers sometimes had to be familiar with in order to understand the nuances of the character interactions and plots of superhero stories. This brings us back around to the issue of continuity, and what comic publishers were doing with it around the 1980s.

### **Reboots and Iteration in DC's comics**

Alongside the wholesale retcon of the DC universe, the late 1980s also saw the re-launching – termed ‘rebooting’ – of DC’s three biggest characters, Superman, Wonder Woman and Batman. Superman became one of the first widely-recognized superhero to receive a reboot when, in 1985, DC executives, faced with slowing sales of their flagship character’s comics, and perhaps feeling the weight of 40 years of history on their efforts to create new Superman stories, chose to restart Superman’s continuity. In open letters to readers within its comics, DC executives and creators explained that in 1986 a new Superman series would debut that would retell Superman’s origin in an ‘updated’ fashion (Byrne 1986). All subsequent issues of Superman would follow only that origin story and, as far as all future Superman stories were concerned, anything that had occurred prior to the new origin-story would be ignored.

This reboot was important in that it constituted a new iteration of the Superman character, based in part on what had come before but expressly and explicitly separate and different from it. Some of the changes marking the new iteration were the birth of Kal-El on Earth, rather than Krypton (indicating an increased connection to humanity and decreased ‘alienness’); Clark Kent’s powers not manifesting themselves until adulthood, which meant

no career as Superboy, a staple of his pre-reboot biography; and the survival of Clark Kent's parents into his adulthood. Some of these differences had already been explored, pre-reboot, in what were called by creators working within the continuity framework, 'imaginary stories': stories that were not part of 'official' continuity and thus had no impact on other ongoing stories starring Superman. However, the reboot of 1985 marked the first time such drastic changes were incorporated into ongoing continuity. Soon after, Wonder Woman and Batman both received similar reboots, complete with new origins, altered characteristics and a complete disavowal of any continuity that had come before.

As it turned out, retcons and character-specific reboots, the first major foray of the superhero comic industry into iteration, actually compounded problems of confused continuity instead of solving them. DC creators soon found that, no matter what retcons or reboots they attempted to apply, the revised continuity inevitably included gaps, inconsistencies and outright contradictions with whatever elements of the old continuity remained in the universe shared by their characters. One of the first and largest of these inconsistencies followed immediately from Superman's reboot, according to which he had never had a career as Superboy. Within DC's older continuity, Superboy had served as the inspiration for the formation of a team of super-powered teenagers in the distant future, the Legion of Superheroes. *Legion of Superheroes* comics had been good sellers for DC since the 1960s and the publisher had every intention of continuing those comics after the Superman reboot and *Crisis on Infinite Earths* retcon. However, creators did not reboot *Legion of Superheroes*, and were thus faced with the conundrum of explaining how the Legion got

started in the new continuity in which Superboy had never existed. As byzantine as the problem may sound, the solution devised by comic creators was much more so, involving multiple 'pocket universes' and super-villain plots that cannot be recounted effectively here.

This process of 'retconning retcons', of which the *Legion of Superheroes* set of problems is just one example, exemplifies the issues involved in what Bowker and Starr, who analyze classification systems in their monograph *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (2000), call 'work-arounds': informal (unplanned, impromptu, localized, sometimes unsanctioned) solutions created by individuals or groups to deal with problems created by the imposition of formal (planned, rigorous, intended to be universal) schemes for organization and classification (Bowker and Star 2000). Though Bowker and Starr focus on schemes such as those used to classify individuals within South African apartheid regimes, their concepts are useful for understanding the processes and problems that underlie any attempt to impose orderly schemes on reality: no scheme can capture every possibility, and eventually the organizer will be faced with a reality that does not fit neatly into any of the categories developed in advance. *Crisis* was DC's attempt to freeze the imaginary realities they had created through 40 years of continuity, to choose which details were 'true' or 'false', and then continue with a fresh, clean slate. When cracks inevitably began to appear in the new classification system – the rebooted/retconned continuity – DC creators attempted to invent new work-arounds in the form of further retcons and reboots, which simply began the process of continuity-complexification all over again. The result was that, by introducing

retcons and reboots, DC had given mainstream superhero comics a large, though not terminal, push out of the continuity framework and into the iterative framework.

Ten years after *Crisis*, DC attempted once again to clean up its continuity problems with a major mini-series, *Zero Hour* (Jurgens 1986). Though less sweeping and grand a story than *Crisis* had been, *Zero Hour* was nonetheless another attempt to retcon the entire DC universe in one fell swoop – in other words, an attempt at a single, giant work-around intended to constrain both old and new discrepancies. It took another ten years before some of those creators could finally push DC's superhero comics completely and explicitly out of a continuity-model and into an iterative model.

In particular, the move away from strict continuity towards iteration was encouraged by the work of two of the most prolific and successful mainstream superhero comic creators currently working in the industry, Mark Waid and Grant Morrison.<sup>60</sup> Though their approaches to iterativity and to superhero comics in general are quite different, both have articulated dissatisfaction with the 'straight jacket' limitations of a strict continuity model of superhero story-telling, particularly as embodied in projects like the streamlined DC universe created through the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series. In short, the arguments of both are that adherence to continuity at the expense of good story-telling is senseless for an industry founded upon telling stories. After *Crisis*, each creator wrote stories intended either to

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<sup>60</sup> See the *Kingdom* mini-series by Waid and his introduction of 'hypertime', and Morrison's work on *Animal Man* and *Superman Beyond 3D*, from *Infinite Crisis*, as well as interviews by both.

circumvent or undo the stringent continuity of the new, singular DC universe, and while neither was able to loosen continuity greatly through his individual efforts, the popularity and sales-figures for their stories did, over time, contribute to larger changes. In 2008 DC released another mini-series called *Infinite Crisis*<sup>61</sup> (Johns, Jimenez et al. 2005-6) during which the DC universe was transformed, once again, into a multiverse, albeit one containing a strictly pre-defined set of 52 separate universes. Some of the universes within this multiverse were explained to contain iterations of the same characters, as they had prior to *Crisis*. In the new model, however, the multiple iterations were allowed to coexist, and while inconsistencies were not sought out, neither were they immediately relegated to the 'other' category of 'imaginary stories' that 'never happened' as they were within the continuity framework.

After several years of stories written within the iterative framework, it seems that the pace of iteration within DC comics may be increasing. Whereas, between 1985 and 2008, iterations (whether in the form of express iterations, retcons or reboots) occurred roughly every ten years, in 2011 DC created its most heavy-handed iteration yet by rebooting its entire line of superhero comics. Called 'The New 52', all of DC's superhero comics were restarted with first issues, while all of the characters, major and minor, were altered – some resurrected, others wiped from existence. Without entering into detailed descriptions of the

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<sup>61</sup> The title is an intentional nod to the earlier *Crisis* series.

changes, one way to emphasize the commitment of DC to iteration (aside from the issue renumbering), is to point out that Superman no longer wears red trunks as part of his costume. Though that iconic uniform has undergone minor changes in the past, the red trunks – the artifact perhaps most ridiculed about superheroes – were constant. As of early 2012, Superman appears in two separate series and wears red trunks in neither. In one series focused on his early career as Superman, he wears a blue t-shirt with the Superman shield on it, jeans, construction boots and a cape that is in fact his childhood blanket. In the second ongoing Superman series, which takes place five years in the future, Superman wears something closer to a traditional superhero costume, which appears to be blue armor with no red component aside from the cape.

Focusing on red ‘underpants’ may seem silly, but this iterative shift is an important one in that it alters one of the most important features of a comic character, his appearance and immediate recognizeability. That creators at DC comics were willing to change a long-standing and widely-recognized element of their flagship character indicates that have fully embraced a model of iteration in which history – both real and fictional continuity – is subservient to a drive to renew and refresh the status-quo.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> This statement is not meant to imply that DC Comics and its employees have artistic or otherwise noble intentions at heart when engaging in iterative creativity. Indeed, though DC has not, to my knowledge, made any direct statements confirming this connection, it seems likely that this change to Superman’s appearance may have been prompted by an ongoing US lawsuit between DC and the families of the character’s creators (now deceased), Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. A recent, partial decision in that lawsuit seems to grant those

This one example is representative of the many other changes instituted by DC creators in their latest iteration of their superhero universe. It is possible, and perhaps likely, that this newly-rebooted universe (whether or not it is a multiverse has not yet been made clear) will not last more than a few years, at which point another iteration will arise. But even if that change is to return to the Superman with red trunks, some of the changes of the current iteration will doubtless remain. As fans of DC superhero comics can attest, *that* has emerged as the one constant rule of comics within the iterative era: each iteration inevitably contributes something to what follows.

### Reboots and Iteration in Marvel's comics

The iterative framework debuted earlier at DC than at Marvel which, having begun telling linked superhero stories in the 1960s, had neither the continuity 'baggage' of DC's superhero comics nor a history of stories operating in an oneiric framework. In its earliest superhero comics, Marvel established that all of its most popular characters operated within the same world by having them appear one another's series. *The Amazing Spider-Man* #1 (Lee and Ditko 1963), Spider-Man's first appearance in his own comic series and second overall appearance, featured the Fantastic Four, already over twenty issues into their own series, on

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families rights to some aspects of the character – including, possibly, the red trunks (as part of his original costume) – while other aspects are retained by DC (specifically, its parent company Time Warner) (Variety.com, accessed 9/4/2012). However, the lawsuit continues and there is little clarity – or, in the case of DC, explicit comment – around how the case is or is not affecting current editorial decisions.

the cover.<sup>63</sup> The Fantastic Four also fought the Hulk, who later joined the Avengers, a team featuring Thor and Iron Man. As a result of its tightened continuity, Marvel did not attempt retcons similar to DC's in the 1980s.

However, during the mid-1990s, the period where comics-sales would reach their historical low point, Marvel did deploy a number of iterative changes. Their first important attempt was a retcon Spider-Man story-arc called 'The Clone Saga', based on a story from a 1970s comic in which a villain cloned Spider-Man. In that story, after the real Spider-Man defeated the clone and the clone accidentally died, Spider-Man burned the clone's body. 'The Clone Saga' introduced the retcon that, in fact, the body had not been burned; the clone had woken up from its coma and, understanding that it was a clone and not the original, decided to travel abroad and live its own life. But the central conceit of this retcon was the revelation that the Spider-Man (and Peter Parker) audiences had been reading about since that 1973 story was actually the clone, and the real Peter Parker, mistakenly believing himself the clone, had abandoned his life. Over the course of two years 'The Clone Saga' reintroduced the clone as Ben Reilly, revealed that Ben was the 'true' Peter Parker, had Ben take over as Spider-Man, and had the previously established Peter Parker give up being Spider-Man and

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<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, the cover implied that Spider-Man was fighting against the Fantastic Four – an early instance of hero battling hero, a trope that both exemplified Marvel's early emphasis of strife among its heroes (more on this in chapter 4) and prefigured trends in superhero comics yet decades in the future: the intercompany-crossover, in which heroes from DC and Marvel would team up in imaginary stories that almost always had them battling each other before teaming up against a supervillain.

leave New York on other pursuits. These changes did not last long: roughly two years after attempting this retcon Marvel killed the Ben Reilly character after establishing that Reilly had been the clone all along.

A few years later, Marvel made a second, simplified attempt at new iterations of their major characters by restarting some series numberings at 1, hoping the lower issue number would help attract new readers ostensibly worried about trying to understand a character or series with decades of history.<sup>64</sup> This led to new iterations of some characters in a technical sense, as their issues had lower numbers and their series were now labeled 'Volume 2', but these were not reboots since the character's continuity continued unabated.<sup>65</sup> Thus, while the

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<sup>64</sup> Problems faced by the mainstream comics industry, and particularly Marvel, in the 1990s, are largely attributed to poor business models that reflected little if any understanding of the particular appeal of superhero comics or their real value as collector's items. The belief that high issue-numbers was keeping audiences away ran parallel to another logic of the period in which new, first issues (numbered either 1 or, in a new trend, 0) would be snapped up unthinkingly by comic collectors for their supposed long-term potential as financial investments. While there was a short period in which "number ones" held mass appeal in the early 1990s, the poor entertainment value of most such comics became quickly apparent, further fuelling the 'crash' of the mid-90s. By the mid-00s, Marvel had largely reversed its renumbering change from the 90s, switching most titles back to their original numbering while taking account of the issues published in the interim. This move, along with the steady, if slow, increase in comic sales since the late 1990s, indicate problems with the approaches of the 90s, including the renumbering effort. From my perspective, renumbering indicated a complete lack of understanding of the appeal of serialized fiction; those who pursue that form for their own pleasure are not put off by extensive histories. Rather, it is one, often central appealing aspect to the form, for those who find rich histories something to explore and revel in, not fear. However, in casual conversations, several comic retailers have told me that any time a new crop of 'number 1's' is published, their sales inevitably increase temporarily. There does, then, seem to be some value in the renumbering strategy, from the publishers' perspective.

<sup>65</sup> There were some exceptions to Marvel's pattern at the time. One was Spider-Man, who received a reboot which included a revised origin and a new, second volume of *Amazing Spider-Man*, starting from issue #1. This reboot instituted few major changes to the character, and most of the changes that were introduced were largely ignored by future creators on the series, leaving the attempted reboot mostly moot. The other exception was a reboot story arc called 'Heroes Reborn' in which some members of two super-teams, the Fantastic Four and the Avengers, seemed to die but were in fact transplanted into another, new universe in which they continued to

late 1980s and early 1990s saw DC enter an iterative period, Marvel's superheroes remained mostly planted in their established continuity until the creation of the 'Ultimate universe' in 2000. Those stories have become Marvel's eventual and lasting projects within the iterative framework of superhero stories.

In those 'Ultimate' comics Marvel created new stories which, as in the 1960s, featured Spider-Man, the X-Men, the Fantastic Four and others all living on the same Earth and interacting. But these new comic series, all titled 'Ultimate', as in *Ultimate Spider-Man* (Bendis and Bagley 2000) and *Ultimate X-Men* (Millar and Kubert 2000), took place in an entirely new and ongoing Marvel continuity (eventually referred to as 'the Ultimate universe') with no connection or relationship with the Marvel universe that had existed since the 1960s. The characters of the Ultimate universe mirror Marvel's established characters, but have newly retold origins and ongoing stories that are completely independent of their non-Ultimate counterparts. Unlike DC's reboots, Marvel's reboots present new versions of their characters alongside but separate from, rather than instead of, the established versions of those characters.

As of the early 2000s, both producers of mainstream superhero comics, Marvel and DC, have deployed multiple continuities for at least some of their most successful characters.

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live similar but different lives. This reboot proved temporary, as after about one year the characters returned to their previous lives within the 'standard' Marvel universe. It has never been made entirely clear whether this was a failed reboot attempt by Marvel, or if the intention all along was eventually to return those characters to their status-quo.

As Henry Jenkins puts it, “comics have entered a period where principles of multiplicity are felt at least as powerfully as those of continuity. Under this new system, readers may consume multiple versions of the same franchise, each with different conceptions of the character” (Jenkins 2009, 20). The next question, then, is why would consumers want this?

### **New structures, new possibilities for drama**

The preceding review explained the growth and eventual domination of continuity over superhero comics, as it became the guiding logic of those stories when serialization increased and the oneiric climate dissipated. I also argued that, around the 1980s, the weight of continuity became too much for those stories (and the genre as a whole) to bear, and as a result continuity came to be largely supplanted by iteration as a structuring agent of the genre, along with increased serialization. Those changes had two important effects on the genre, both of which increased its ability to elicit pleasurable experiences in audiences.

The first important effect is related primarily to audiences already established as superhero fans. It seems to me that Marina Bianchi’s analysis of collecting and its pleasures (1997) yields interesting results when applied to superhero comics and the genre in general. Bianchi identifies “two main features of the activity of collecting. One is seriality, the fact that the material or immaterial objects of the collection are organized in a recognizable whole, in an ordered set of connections. The other is novelty, the fact that the set is open to discoverable new connections and links” (Bianchi 1997, 275) She goes on to describe collecting as a navigation of these two elements, “a process of learning during which the

consumer-collector develops two forms of strategy, one aiming at the reduction of uncertainty and disorder, the other at increasing it in the form of variation and complexity.... the first providing the bounds within which novelty can occur, the second showing that these bounds are in fact fruitful in terms of being novelty-producing” (Bianchi 1997, 281). This argument proposes that limitations – in the specific form of familiarity, regularity or what she terms seriality – are necessary for this particular kind of enjoyment. Or, as Bianchi concludes, “(n)ovelty, in other words, is pleasant but within bounds: too low degree is boring, too high degree is threatening” (Bianchi 1997, 282).

For superhero comics, both continuity and iteration function as stimulators of, and limits to, novelty. During the continuity period, established history was, in theory, absolutely limiting to attempts at experimentation. As a result, experimentation was often relegated to the ‘other’ category – the imaginary story – the left-over catch-all category that is the inevitable result of any system intended to delimit ‘everything’ (as per my discussion of Bowker & Starr, above). Eventually, experimentation – the fundamental creativity of storytelling – forced its way back into superhero comics, bypassing the imaginary story in favour of the retcon, which functioned as the thread binding the experimental ‘patches’ to the larger fabric of continuity. But retcons created a situation of too much novelty, not within the changes they articulated but in the unanswerable gaps implied by their retroactive changes. Reboots, on the other hand, provide space for experimentation while imposing a new, clearly demarcated continuity, imposing limits on subsequent experimentation while avoiding the confusion of mixed continuities that were often the by-product of retcons.

Following Bianchi's model, this results in increased potential for enjoyment on the part of the collector or, in this case, the fan.

The second important effect of the shift from continuity to iteration relates equally to fans and non-fans, and was touched on above. When superhero comics embraced serial storytelling in the 1980s, superhero stories moved from single-issue stories to much longer affairs in which details other than those essential to plot could be explored. That structural change was necessary before the genre could begin to deploy what I discuss in the next two chapters as modern melodrama. Without the shift to full serialization, superheroes might never have had the opportunity to grow from somewhat melodramatic, action-oriented characters, into the superdramatic characters they did eventually become.

## **Conclusion**

Since their inception, superhero comics have undergone significant structural changes. The first important structural change is related to the relationship of the genre to its own internal history. During the oneiric period, that relationship was intentionally fuzzy and unclear. This was followed by the continuity period, in which strict rules were meant to eliminate contradictions within that aging and increasingly complicated internal history. As the continuity period neared its end, those rules failed increasingly, leading to attempts by comic creators to create work-arounds in the forms of retcons and reboots. Those work-arounds were only temporarily successful, and by the 1980s superhero comics had entered the iteration period, in which internal history is occasionally – and perhaps with increasing frequency –

wiped clean and restarted from zero. That set of changes was linked to the second important change, the increased serialization of stories in superhero comics.

Together, these changes increased possibilities for audiences to experience enjoyable, possibly aesthetically intense moments from the superhero genre. Iteration in comics has allowed fans – those who regularly consume superhero stories – a clearer and more intimate understanding of the characters they love than did the oneiric climate, while allowing more (limited) novelty and experimentation than was permitted during the period of strict continuity. Seriality in comics allows creators to tell stories in a more decompressed fashion than was possible in single-issue stories, thus giving those creators the room to develop more nuanced characters with more detailed backgrounds, relationships and interactions with others. That, in turn, allowed superheroes to grow from being simple ciphers for action-sequences, to characters with interesting subtleties and quirks.

# 4 Superheroes and Melodrama (1940s – 1970s)

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A team – and a family of adventurers, explorers and imaginants, the Fantastic Four lead lives  
**both ordinary – and extraordinary!**  
Epigraph, *Fantastic Four* #556, emphasis added (Millar and Hitch 2008)

This chapter and the next constitute one long argument about the melodrama of superheroes. In this chapter I begin by defining melodrama with some attention given to older, historical forms, but with more emphasis placed on contemporary forms. I argue that modern melodrama has five essential characteristics. I then begin a review of the melodrama of the superhero genre as it developed until the early 1980s, addressing a number of media, not just comics. My goal is to demonstrate that superheroes have always mobilized some melodrama, but that their melodramatic character has changed over time as they have approached their current incarnation as agents of superdrama. I perform careful analysis of one of the earliest superhero stories to illustrate the kind of melodrama out of which the genre was born; that analysis contrasts with a similar endeavor in the next chapter, in which I continue my argument by explaining the character and significance of contemporary superhero melodrama.

## What is melodrama?

The phrase 'melodrama' was derived from the 18<sup>th</sup> century French term *mélo drame*, or 'melodic drama', a label for dramatic theatre that featured musical accompaniment (Brooks 1984, 14). Sometimes the drama was mimed and, without dialogue to communicate meaning to audiences, exaggerated physical gestures by the actors and expansive musical accompaniment became necessary. This staple of the genre continued through 19<sup>th</sup> century England, where farm Enclosure Acts forced large numbers of the less-educated populace into cities (Bargainnier 1975, 728). These newly concentrated 'masses' sought out entertainment and, according to Bargainnier, theatre managers quickly adapted by building larger halls to accommodate the new, more numerous devotees of the theatre. The larger halls then required 'larger' production-values, styles of presentation spectacular enough for viewers seated far away from the action nevertheless to see, hear and understand it all. The exaggerated acting style of French pantomime, now supplemented by music and dialogue, matched well with the "coarsened...spectacular action" (Bargainnier 1975, 759) theatre owners demanded from dramatists who, for their part, adapted existing novels to maintain a steady flow of 'new' products for the stage. Bargainnier posits that the large audiences interested in melodramatic products "sought release and fulfillment, excitement and a better world than the one in which they lived" (Bargainnier 1975, 730).

John Cawelti's arguments (2006) parallel Bargainnier's identification of 'coarsened action' and 'a better world' as important aspects of melodrama, when Cawelti identifies another key characteristic of melodrama: "Melodrama moves from a sense of injustice and

disorder to an affirmation of a benevolent moral order in the universe. It is a highly popular form because it affirms some conventional moral or philosophical principle as the inherent basis of cosmic order” (Cawelti 2006, 262). Anyone with even a passing familiarity with superhero stories will recognize congruities between these characteristics of melodrama and the superhero genre. Exaggerated physicality, bombastic musical accompaniment (in non-comic adaptations), coarsened and spectacular action, plot-driven stories, and a firm sense of justice are standard features of superhero stories, and certainly of other genres of popular, mainstream entertainment as well. Cawelti’s work supports the idea that melodrama has become increasingly ubiquitous over time, as he characterizes melodrama as unique among what he calls formula types – action, romance, horror – because only it can contain and use the particular ‘fantasies’ of the other genres, deploying elements specific to each genre in such a way as to produce melodramatic results. In his view, “the quest for intensified narrative or dramatic effects is characteristic of the entire range of formulaic types” (Cawelti 2006, 45), and melodrama is therefore a kind of sub-characteristic or meta-type that is identifiable more by its effects (or intended effects) on audiences than by particular motifs, tropes or themes.

Peter Brooks’ characterization of melodrama resonates strongly with my view of superheroes’ cultural cachet. He asserts that melodrama, “an excessive, hyperbolic story [created] from the banal stuff of reality,” seeks above all to touch something “essential... to go beyond the surface of the real to the truer, hidden reality, to open up the world of the spirit” (Brooks 1984, 199). This follows an historical analysis through which Brooks posits

the growth of melodrama during the Enlightenment as paralleling a widespread loss of faith in established religions for general moral and ethical guidance. Brooks goes on to argue that this diminished regard for religion also resulted in “a world where there is no longer any clear idea of the sacred,” and that, therefore, “the development of the melodramatic mold... is perhaps first of all a desperate effort to renew contact with the sacred... to insist that behind reality, hidden by it yet indicated within it, there is a realm where large moral forces are operative, where large choices of ways of being must be made” (Brooks 1984, 216). Though I do not find Brooks’ assertion of some mystical domain ‘behind reality’ convincing,<sup>66</sup> Brooks makes other less vague and more useful contributions regarding melodrama itself, as when he asserts the following: “The search to bring into the drama of man’s quotidian existence the higher drama of moral forces seems to me one of the large quests of the melodramatic imagination ... The melodramatists refuse to allow that... there are not more things on earth than can be represented exclusively in terms of the material world” (Brooks 1984, 218-19). Here, Brooks identifies what is to me melodrama’s most important characteristic, with respect to superhero melodrama: mixing the everyday drama of ‘quotidian existence’ with some form of ‘higher drama’. As I argue throughout this chapter and the next, it is that mixing at which the superhero has come, in recent years, to excel, increasing the mainstream

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<sup>66</sup> I agree with Stanley Cavell’s argument (Cavell 1996) concerning Brooks’ reliance on the phrase “the moral occult” to label the “realm” of larger moral forces existing ‘behind’ reality. This step leads only to conceptual confusion, since Brooks is unable to do more than employ relational adjectives (behind, beyond) as he attempts to explore this realm of spirituality.

popularity of the figure and the genre. This is due in part to the centrality of the dual identity trope to the figure of the superhero, since that trope always required superhero stories to deploy elements both ordinary (captured by the hero's 'civilian' persona) and extraordinary (captured by her 'heroic' persona). However, as I demonstrate below, early superhero stories contrasted rather than mixed those elements, keeping them outside the realm of melodrama (and usually positioned squarely within the adventure genre). Those stories, therefore, were unable to achieve what David Thornblum identifies as the central quality behind appreciation for melodrama: "melodrama is popular because it tries to insist that the everyday world of the viewer... is important and has dignity – the ordinary is important. Melodrama is thus always in conflict with itself, gesturing simultaneously toward ordinary reality and toward a moral and emotional heightening that is rarely encountered in the real world" (Thornblum 1976, 87). Until superheroes began, in the 1990s, 'gesturing *simultaneously*' toward the ordinary and extraordinary, they could not begin to deploy what I call superdrama and thereby attain new levels of mainstream popularity.

Ien Ang's exploration of melodrama has similar overtones to those I have examined, but she avoids Brooks' mystical wanderings by grounding her theorizations in data collected from viewers of the television program *Dallas*. Ang argues that "a *melodramatic imagination*... is... the expression of refusal, or inability, to accept insignificant everyday life as banal and meaningless, and is born of a vague, inarticulate dissatisfaction with existence here and now," a dissatisfaction she reads from *Dallas* fans' own descriptions of what they get out of watching *Dallas* (Ang 1985, 79). For Ang, imagination is inexorably linked with feelings as

well as thoughts. An appreciation for melodrama requires more than rational engagement; it requires a commitment of feeling, something melodrama can sometimes elicit from viewers through what Ang labels the tragic structure of feeling: “the tragic structure of feeling does not concern ‘the Great Tragedy of Man’... but... a half-conscious realization of the tragic side of ordinary, everyday life” (Ang 1985, 78).

*Dallas* was a prime-time, or nighttime, soap opera and, though soaps are sometimes considered their own genre, they are also often regarded as the *sine non qua* of popular melodrama as they deploy all of the essential characteristics of that genre. In her discussion, Ang references Charlotte Brundson’s work, which argues that “the ideological problematic of soap opera, that is, the perspective from which events in the narrative take on meaning, is that of ‘personal life’. More particularly, personal life in its everyday realization through personal relationships” (Ang 1985, 59). Where other melodramatic products might take other routes to achieve melodrama, soap operas do so primarily, almost exclusively, through personal confrontations<sup>67</sup>: “the basic structure of every *Dallas* episode always remains the same... nearly all scenes consist of conversations... [in which] problems and mutual conflicts are expressed... when one problem is still unsolved, another looms on the horizon” (Ang 1985,

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<sup>67</sup> This is due in large measure to the limited budgets of soap operas, which is in turn a partial explanation for their exceptional longevity as television products, many having existed for decades, not years. The limited budget makes them an attractive product for studios and producers, but also limits what can be shown; little is cheaper to show on television than people talking to one another. As Ang points out, this factor was mitigated somewhat for night-time soaps like *Dallas*, which were granted larger budgets (as they aired during more profitable broadcasting hours) and were thus able to include other, more spectacular scenarios in the pursuit of melodramatic effect, such as fires, car accidents and explosions.

8). This has an added effect of forcing the presentation of events outside the personal sphere, such as workplace related matters, to be translated into and taken up within the sensibilities of the personal sphere. So, as Ang and Brundson have argued, whereas police or doctor television dramas present criminal or medical matters largely within a professional framework, when soap operas take up such matters they usually do so by presenting the complications those matters wreak within the home. This, then, is a key demarcation of what Ang and Brundson understand as melodramatic entertainment products.

In her review of audience responses to *Dallas*, Ang found that one of the central attractions of melodrama was its ability to draw viewers into the lives of its characters: “Characters who are caricatures or ‘improbable’ are not esteemed... [t]he effect of ‘genuineness’ is then the most important thing these viewers expect. Only when they experience the fiction of the serial as ‘genuine’ can they feel involved in it. They have to be able to believe that the characters constructed in the text are ‘real people’ whom they can find pleasant or unpleasant, with whom they can feel affinity or otherwise, and so on” (Ang 1985, 33-4). There is a general tendency towards ridiculing such statements when they come from television viewers, misunderstanding in particular the idea that characters might be related to as ‘real people’. Similar ridicule is leveled against superhero fans – indeed, fans of any melodramatic and/or serialized product – when they engage in debates about powers, abilities, or any other facet of the character or world not fully defined by the authoring text. In effect, this is ridicule of the exploration of fictional worlds that proceeds as if those worlds were real.

I find therefore that one valuable aspect of Ang's ethnomethodological work is to dispel the idea that "affinity" for characters and feelings of "involvement" on the part of fans are based on their simplistic belief that the characters are real people. The joy of serialized melodrama actually comes from characters who are robust, quirky or generally interesting enough that audiences are able to develop feelings and intellectual curiosity about them, and not from any misguided belief in the 'reality' of those characters. What is clear is that in order for audiences to feel involved with, connected to, curious about, sympathetic to or resentful of fictional characters, characters must possess (and audiences must appreciate) some kind of depth, believability, or humanity. Some of the best stories manage to do this in 'one shot': films or novels with plots and characters that reach and affect consumers.

In a far greater number of instances, however, time and familiarity are the necessary ingredients for audiences to build feelings of connectedness to fictions and fictional characters. A character that appears in one film is analogous to the character in a non-serialized television program, comic or any other medium in that they have relatively little time to develop their own history.<sup>68</sup> A character who reappears in multiple stories at relatively regular intervals in the reader's life has repeated opportunities to develop within the reader a sense of familiarity and depth. This, in turn, increases the melodramatic potential and effect of the product by drawing audiences into the lives and struggles of its

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<sup>68</sup> The novel stands apart here, since it has the potential to tell much denser stories than do most films.

characters. This feeling of connection to the characters is one central component to the increase of the superhero's mainstream popularity in recent years, as I discuss in detail below.

Gates defines melodrama as a term "most often associated with films of pathos and heightened emotionality including the woman's film and family melodramas" (Gates 2001, 60). Gates helps me connect superhero products to melodrama when she argues that film-director John Woo's action movies are an exemplary form of contemporary melodrama. She points out that "Steve Neale also argues that during the Classical Hollywood period, specifically between 1938 and 1960, the film industry originally used the term melodrama not for describing the films directed at female audiences, but for "war films, adventure films, horror films, and thrillers, genres traditionally thought of as, if anything, 'male'" (Gates 2001, 60). Gates then argues that action films, in the hands of the right director, can therefore be melodramatic in both of these senses, since John Woo's "films are not only overflowing with scenes of action and violence but also are saturated with scenes of pathos and emotionality" (Gates 2001, 62). As I discuss below, many if not most superhero products have increasingly taken on these characteristics over the last few decades.

In summary, the essential characteristics of what I will term '*modern melodrama*'<sup>69</sup> as I have outlined it are:

- 1) exciting 'action' often supported by musical accompaniment and exaggerated displays of emotion and pathos
- 2) the presence of a definite moral order, usually made explicit by a violation early in the story and its rectification toward the story's end
- 3) emphasis on the everyday experiences of ordinary people, but performed in such a manner as to imply those experiences have meaning beyond the mundane, usually through thematic links between those experiences and the larger, moral order – in short, a bridging of the ordinary and extraordinary within the personality and/or experiences of the central character(s)
- 4) a focus on story-telling about and, whenever possible, through the lens of personal relationships, including, when possible, the expression of other plot concerns (e.g. legal, financial, medical, etc.) via discussion and argument between individuals
- 5) characters whose personal histories are allowed continued development over time, in order that they may accrue depth and elicit empathy from viewers

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<sup>69</sup> I use this term below, less to periodize these characteristics than as an easy label to distinguish forms of melodrama that capture all five characteristics from earlier examples of melodrama – superhero melodrama in particular – which did not capture all five. I outline my conception of 'traditional melodrama', below.

It seems to me that when all of these characteristics are deployed together they can sometimes combine to produce an intensified dramatic effect on audiences, who can experience moments of aesthetic intensity when they are 'carried along' by the melodramatic product, rather than subjecting it to rational, intellectual analysis during its consumption (though such analysis may follow later, after the moment of consumption).<sup>70</sup> Obviously this kind of effect can be produced through other, non-melodramatic products as well. But even a casual survey of popular culture over the last few decades reveals increasing attention to melodramatic motifs, particularly motifs 4 and 5 identified above.<sup>71</sup> And, as I argue throughout this chapter and the next, superheroes have attained newfound popularity in large measure because of their relatively recent embracing of more of these melodramatic motifs. I examine these changes in detail below, after first providing a careful analysis of the melodramatic elements (or lack thereof) in one of the earliest instances of superhero fiction.

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<sup>70</sup>A more formal discussion of this process is the topic of chapter five.

<sup>71</sup>I do not have data to support this assertion. Rather, it is one of the personal observations that inspired this entire work. Item 5 identified above, characters with deep and ongoing personal histories, is especially evident in this regard. This has been the case principally since the dawn of cable television in the U.S. and the explosion of serialized, non-soap-opera programming on cable in the 1990s, prior to which most television programs (other than soap operas) featured very little serialization, relying instead much more frequently on episodic story-telling (both formats were discussed in detail in the previous chapter). Over the last 20 years, in television as in superhero comics, episodic story-telling has been largely surpassed by serialized story-telling – at least, to the extent that characters almost always have ongoing personal histories that accrue detail and grow over time.

## **The melodrama of early superhero comics: a *fully* segmented case study**

Superman's fifth appearance came in *Action Comics* #5, cover-dated October, 1938 (Siegel and Shuster 2006). At this stage Superman's stories still appeared alongside others in each issue of *Action*, and so this untitled story runs for only 9 pages, less than half the length of the eventual norm for superhero comics. The story is told with stark efficiency, the plot set up in the first three panels: after a heavy downpour, a dam outside a small American town is threatening to give way. The Editor of the newspaper for which Clark Kent and Lois Lane work wants to send Clark to cover the story, but Clark is unavailable and Lois volunteers. The Editor replies, "it's too important – this is no job for a girl!" Now angered, Lois finds Kent and sends him chasing a phony story while she gains a head-start toward the dam. By page three Kent has discovered Lois's trick, changed into Superman and outraced Lois' train to the dam, saving that train from a collapsed trestle along the way. Arriving on scene, Lois enters an abandoned car just before being struck by flood waters. Superman arrives just on time to free the vehicle from the flood-waters, and Lois, knocked unconscious, fails to witness the rest of his actions to divert floodwater and save the town. She awakens for 4 panels on the final page, in which she interacts with both Kent and Superman.

Kent and Lane interact during two sequences, at the story's opening and at its conclusion. Kent, playing the role of the coward, expresses interest in further interaction with Lane who, perpetually unimpressed with Kent's "spinelessness," spurns his interest with disgust. Once Kent transforms himself into Superman, he has no further interactions with other characters. Superman occasionally makes quips to himself about Lane or a task at

hand, but does not engage in any dialogue. Instead, his actions are explained and enhanced through narrative boxes. Superman's light-hearted quips in the face of danger, combined with the narrative's colourful descriptions of his amazing actions, enhance the extraordinary character of his actions, and we do not see any ordinary responses to danger, such as fear or even uncertainty. Only when the action is over and Lane regains consciousness are dialogue or human interaction allowed. However, now that Lane expresses interest in interacting with Superman, telling him she loves him and exclaiming "DON'T GO! Stay with me... Always!", Superman refuses her advance. He allows her to kiss him and, as she begs him to stay, replies breezily "perhaps we'll meet again." Once Kent reappears to assure Lane his forgiveness for her trick at the story's opening, she once again dismisses him, expressing disgust with him "after having been in the arms of a REAL he-man."

Short as it is, this story includes more Lois Lane content than most early Superman stories, making it a useful case-study of melodramatic motifs in the earliest superhero comics. Lois Lane's character is used to interject some semblance of romantic – and comedic – irony into the story, and her exclamations of intense desire and revulsion for Superman/Kent can certainly be seen as stereotypically exaggerated melodramatic moments. But a focus on the list of characteristics of melodrama above highlights the lack of interpersonal relationships in this story, without which modern melodrama is not achieved. In this story, as with most superhero stories of the period, a relationship between the protagonist and the obvious love-interest is refused in the interest of serving one of, perhaps the central trope of the superhero genre at the time, the secret identity.

Though the plot concerns the potential flood, one of the driving themes of the story is Superman's efforts to keep his dual identity a secret from Lois Lane. I discussed the centrality of the dual identity trope in the Introduction, and it is important to recognize that, among superhero stories of the time and until the 1960s, the preservation of the secret identity was usually relied upon by creators to complicate the protagonist's situation.<sup>72</sup> Superman in particular was often more challenged by preserving his secret identity than by the stopping or preventing crimes. In effect, preserving his secret was often used by creators to hobble an increasingly-powerful character who, without such restrictions on his abilities, would probably have stopped all crimes so quickly and easily as to make interesting stories impossible. The result is what I will refer to as a *fully-segmented* character or superhero, one who acts very differently in each of her two identities (typically weak and cowardly as a civilian, only revealing their true courage and strength in costume), and one for whom at least some story-telling space is often devoted to concealing her secret identity from a potential love-interest. This was the quintessential superhero during the genre's earliest days and later reappeared when the genre moved into new media, as I discuss below. The important point for the moment is that this segmentation of the hero and their larger-than-life abilities from their 'everyday life' reality, nullifies any chance of fulfilling characteristic (3) of modern melodrama, bridging of the ordinary and the extraordinary. So, as a result of

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<sup>72</sup> As I discuss below, this trend did not end in the 1960s; rather, it became less relied-upon, at least for some comic titles.

taking as its central concern the preservation of Superman's secret identity, and of operating squarely within the oneiric climate discussed in the previous chapter, this Superman story, as with most stories of its time, is only capable of embracing the first two of the five characteristics of modern melodrama I defined above. There is no lack of spectacular action from these early superhero stories, and though this story does not explicitly concern a violation of the law, a moral order is implicit, as it always is, in Superman's self-sacrifice while protecting others. The other elements of modern melodrama, however, are missing, as made clear by the scenes which include both Clark Kent and Lois Lane.

Though the theorists reviewed above did not engage with the visual facets of melodrama and the creation of melodramatic effects, those facets are central to any medium communicating through visuals. As with the earliest forms of television, the melodramatic reach of early superhero comics like *Action #5* was restricted in part by art which could not effectively produce *close-ups*. While different artists produced different levels of artistic quality, for the most part comic art, still in its infancy, was simplistic and not highly detailed. This story includes some experimentation by Joe Shuster with comic panels of different sizes, but little attention is given to drawing characters whose physical expression, facial or bodily, convey their inner states. Chief among these would be close-ups of faces.

If we refer back to the hallmark of visual melodrama, the soap opera, it becomes apparent that a key component is the close-up, in which the entire screen is taken up by one face. Most scenes in soap operas follow a standard pattern, beginning with a 'master' or pulled-back view that gives the audience a look at the entire *mis-en-scene*. This is followed by

some establishing-shots, in which the actors central to the scene are usually framed together, having approached one another. Finally, as the scene intensifies, the camera moves in for the full close-up, cutting between each actor as they speak. This illusion of spatial closeness allows the audience to enhance their understanding of the scenario, based initially on plot development, dialogue and musical accompaniment, by 'reading' the emotional expressions of the actors. By the 1970s superhero comics began to adopt this approach, as well as other cinematic visual styles, in an effort to use the page more variously. However, when *Action #5* was published, no such techniques existed. For the most part, the 'camera' of this story remains at a fixed distance from the figures, so that roughly three-quarters of all characters' bodies are present in most panels. While there are a close-up images, they are not used to enhance dialogue between characters but to demonstrate shock at extraordinary events, such as the damaged train-trestle or oncoming flood-waters. While the close-up in soaps is used to draw the audience into interactions among characters, thus enhancing an experience of the ordinary, in *Action #5* the close-up is used only to convey the shock of one character to an extraordinary situation. Further, the simplicity of the drawings means that little in the way of emotion – other than wide-eyed surprise – can be faithfully conveyed, even at the level of the close-up.

As a result of these factors, this early Superman story operates primarily within the registers of adventure and fantasy, through Superman's brightly coloured costume, fantastic powers and extraordinary acts, and traditional melodrama and romance, through Clark and Lois' spurned proclamations of love, rather than what I have defined as modern melodrama.

Having presented this careful analysis of one product, I switch now to a broader perspective in order to sketch the growth of, and changes to, melodrama in superhero products over several decades following the publication of *Action #5*.

### **Melodramatic developments, 1940s – 1970s: faults and foibles**

Thanks in large part to the booming sales of comics during World War II, the 1940s saw the creation and demise of hundreds of superhero characters in a burst of market-driven creativity unseen in superhero comics since. The rapid-pace storytelling exemplified by *Action #5* (above) was characteristic of superhero comics of the time, and the protagonists of superhero comics tended to make the leap to crime fighting rather quickly and with little explanation. A superhero's first story typically began with a quick origin sequence occupying between one and three pages which tells how they gained their powers. Without much explanation, they then turned immediately to 'defending the weak' and fighting crime. Not all superheroes followed this trend, since some, such as Wonder Woman and Captain America, were positioned primarily as war-time heroes and so went immediately to fighting Germans or Nazi-related threats. But whatever shape their particular enemy took, comic-book superheroes almost always moved immediately from becoming super to fighting crime, with little story-telling provided to explain why these characters acted in the ways they did. And, once established as crime-fighters, superheroes of that period tended to follow Superman's example by putting their secret identity ahead of any personal relationships, resulting in a standard for the entire genre in which melodrama was limited to characteristics

1 and 2 above. This style of melodrama, what I will call ‘traditional melodrama’<sup>73</sup>, dominated superhero comics through the 1950s, a period in which their popularity, or at least the sales of their comics, diminished drastically as other genres proved more popular among comic readers.

By the early 1960s DC was the only comic publisher producing regular, well-selling superhero comics. Marvel Comics owner Martin Goodman, who had kept Marvel (then Timely Comics) in business through the 1950s by selling only reprints, wanted to re-enter the superhero market and said as much to his only remaining full-time employee, a young writer-cum-art director and editor, Stan Lee (Wright 2001, 201).<sup>74</sup> Lee had already enjoyed some modest success writing science fiction comics which had served to distinguish Marvel’s style from DC’s, as Bradford Wright argues: “[t]he unknown in DC’s comic books was something to be conquered through scientific progress. In Marvel’s, it was something to be left undisturbed” (Wright 2001, 202). Where DC’s superheroes tended to be lantern-jawed agents of the status-quo, the characters Lee had produced at Marvel, in conjunction with the art of either Jack Kirby or Steve Ditko, “tended to be alienated and neurotic individuals –

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<sup>73</sup> This label is not intended as a claim that all melodramatic products of the period or any period can be equated with the melodrama of early superhero comics. Rather, I use the label as a simple way to distinguish the melodrama of those superhero comic from the more intense and robust forms that, I argue, became the norm of the genre over time.

<sup>74</sup> Lee is credited with having created (or co-created) Spider-Man as well as most of Marvel’s other successful superheroes, and no history of Marvel or of superhero comics could be written without engaging with his involvement. I mention and discuss him uncritically here, but it is not my intention to imply a ‘great person’ history of Spider-Man or Marvel Comics.

small pathetic men unable to adapt to the national spirit of consensus” (Wright 2001, 203).

As Martin Goodman saw the profile of DC’s superhero comics rising he asked Lee to develop some new characters with which to jump on the bandwagon, starting with something “featuring a team of superheroes modeled after DC’s *Justice League of America*” (Wright 2001, 204). Lee (1974) relates the following retrospective response in his trademark hyperbolic style:

For just this once, I would do the type of story I myself would enjoy reading if I were a comic-book reader. And the characters would be the kind of characters I could personally relate to; they'd be flesh and blood, they'd have their faults and foibles, they'd be fallible and feisty and – most important of all – inside their colourful, costumed booties they'd still have feet of clay.... For the first time we'd have a hero and a heroine who were actually engaged. No more coy suggestions that she'd really dig the guy if only she knew his true identity. And... I was utterly determined to have a superhero series without any secret identities... Accepting this premise, it was also natural to decide to forgo the use of costumes. If our heroes were to live in the real world, then let them dress like real people (Lee 1974, 17)

So, in 1962 Marvel Comics released the first issue of *The Fantastic Four (FF)*, written by Lee and drawn by Jack Kirby. *FF* presented a novel take on the superhero team by emphasizing internal strife among the members of the team: Reed Richards (Mr. Fantastic) and Sue Storm (Invisible Girl), a married couple; Ben Grimm (the super-strong Thing), Reed’s old friend; and Johnny Storm (the Human Torch), Sue’s younger brother. Where superhero team comics had traditionally emphasized cooperation among team-members, *FF* complicated the team relationship by regularly presenting readers with scenes of conflict within this ‘family’. Richards and Sue Storm fought often, as Sue objected to Reed’s lack of attention to her as he repeatedly disappeared into his laboratory; Johnny Storm, a wise-

cracking teenager, went out of his way to mock Ben Grimm's monstrous appearance, who lost his temper easily and had super-strength tantrums. Grimm himself was an extremely unusual character for superhero comics, as his new body was more monster-like than typically superheroic. Six or seven feet tall and somewhat misshapen, the Thing had orange, rock-like skin. Unlike Marvel's next creation, the Hulk, Ben never changed back into human form and so lived a life, heroic though it was, of shame and ridicule thanks to his appearance. In their first issue the team had no costumes<sup>75</sup> or masks and, though they took on code-names, did not keep their true names or identities a secret. They were feared by the public and attacked by the army, and their first appearance was as much a story of the horror genre as one of the superhero genre as it existed at the time. *Fantastic Four* #1 was snapped up by the comic-buying public, who made it Marvel's best-selling comic-book to date.

*FF*'s success encouraged Marvel to give Lee, Ditko and Kirby more opportunities to try their new, 'more realistic' take on superheroes. *The Incredible Hulk* #1 (Lee and Kirby 1962) came next; following that in 1963 was Spider-Man's first appearance in issue fifteen of the comic series *Amazing Fantasy*, with Lee credited as writer and Steve Ditko as artist of that story (Stan Lee 1962). As with the *Fantastic Four*, and despite Spider-Man's stronger fit with established superhero conventions (costume, codename, secret identity), Lee chose not to call this new character a superhero within the text of this first story. Instead, a caption box over

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<sup>75</sup> Costumes did appear after just a few issues, though the team's identities stayed public knowledge.

the first page referred to him as a new example of the “costumed heroes” or “long underwear characters” who were, Lee admitted wholeheartedly, “a dime a dozen” – although this one was to be different. Lee’s irreverent style, combined with a number of elements new to the superhero genre which were built into Spider-Man’s first story made the “young, flawed, and brooding antihero... the most widely imitated archetype in the... genre since the appearance of Superman” (Wright 2001, 212).

Family strife (in *Fantastic Four*), rage (in *Hulk*) and teenage angst (in *Spider-Man*) all intensified the melodramatic character of superhero stories. In part, this was made possible by the stories’ partial shift out of the oneiric climate of episodic story-telling, and into the more serialized story-telling of the continuity model discussed in the previous chapter. That shift allowed characters to begin accruing personal histories across each story, the fifth characteristic of modern melodrama listed above. This was supplemented, particularly in *Fantastic Four*, by the fact that as a superheroic family the members of that super-team did not need to maintain a secret identity and could – and did – discuss, argue over, enjoy and lament their experiences with each other. This meant both increased focus on personal relationships (the fourth element of modern melodrama) and reduced segmentation of the heroic characters, meaning a *rapprochement* of ordinary and extraordinary (the fifth element). Though Spider-Man and the Hulk were more solitary figures than the members of the *Fantastic Four*, their stories achieved the same effect through increased internal monologues and, in what proved to be another genre-changer, a tendency of Marvel’s characters to interact verbally while interacting physically – to speak to and usually to taunt enemies

while fighting. Though Spider-Man is perhaps best known for his verbal jabs,<sup>76</sup> all of Marvels' heroes – even the taciturn Hulk – engaged in such banter. Whether joking, aggressive, mocking or otherwise in tone, the verbal engagements punctuating physical battles all added *discussion* of a kind to the page and story. Instead of only pounding on each other, the characters of these stories now engaged in verbal dialogue as well, just like the characters of soap operas. Though the superhero 'fight dialogue' was not as intimate and therefore as directly melodramatic as the dialogue of soap operas, it did contribute to the reader's sense of some kind of relationship – albeit a quirky one – between the hero and the villain, especially when that dialogue referred to previous battles and the shared, accrued history between these characters.

These three examples are representative of a larger trend that began in 1960s superhero comics, that of increased melodrama incorporated through greater attention by creators to both the 'civilian' and internal lives of their characters through such story-telling devices as personal relationships, internal monologues and increased banter. On the whole, though the secret identity remained mostly inviolate during this period and superheroes were kept largely 'segmented', superhero comics did see a shift toward embracing what I have called 'modern melodrama'.

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<sup>76</sup> Spider-Man did become a superhero archetype, not just because of his powers and full-body costume, but because of his personality as well. There has always existed an interesting contrast between his 'down on my luck' attitude as Peter Parker, and his irreverent, upbeat joking attitude while taunting villains as Spider-Man.

I resume this interpretive history of superhero comic melodrama in the next chapter. Below, I turn to examine superhero melodrama in other media around the same period just discussed.

### **Superheroes on the screen**

Another development that pushed superheroes in a melodramatic direction, if indirectly, was their debut as live-action entertainment for adults in the form of the television program *Batman* (1966-68). This was the first superhero product to air during what is now called 'prime time', or weekday evenings, at which time the bulk of television viewers were assumed to be adults and not children. This was not due simply to the fact that it was not a cartoon, but because it approached the superhero from a new direction that made the genre palatable to a different audience: camp, or what amounted to self-ridicule. Will Brooker (2005) argues that comics had started to appeal to a camp sensibility in the early 1960s, before the TV show was formally conceived. The development of Pop Art, of which Brooker, following Jenkins and Spiegel and Susan Sontag, finds camp to be a sub-movement, had already pushed comic and superhero figures off the small page and onto the large canvas in the works of Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and others (Brooker 2005, 180). Brooker reasons that comic creators, eager to seize on this sudden newfound respectability granted by Pop Art to popular culture, may have tried to work "this sense of irony, camp and polysemy" into their works and identifies letters from comic readers implying appreciation of just these qualities (Brooker 2005, 184). But where Pop Art took itself seriously as an art form, camp

was distinguished by an effort to take nothing so seriously as ridicule and self-ridicule, achievements at which *Batman*, the television program, excelled. Its camp characteristics – the ‘na-na-na-na-na-na’ theme music, Adam West’s spandex-bound, sagging belly and eyebrow-painted cowl, the comical fight-scenes punctuated by onomatopoeically-inspired visual ‘sound effects’ such as POW!, BLAM! and WHAMO! – are likely burned quite irrevocably into most memories and require little discussion here. Brooker refers to interviews with the show’s creator, William Dozier, in order to show that *Batman*’s camp tone was no accident: “I had just the simple idea of overdoing it, of making it so square and so serious that adults would find it amusing. I knew kids would go for the derring-do, the adventure, but the trick would be to find adults who would either watch it with their kids, or, to hell with the kids, and watch it anyways” (Eisner 1986, 6). The approach worked, if only for a short time, as *Batman* garnered very high prime-time ratings in its first season, lost most of them by its second and was cancelled after its third. But Dozier’s statement sets the stage for the rest of my overview, which highlights the ‘adult oriented’ melodramatic aspects that became more common to non-comic superhero products through the coming decade.

Despite its self-mocking tone, the program can be seen to have contributed to the superhero’s slow shift into melodrama. For one thing, Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson were as important to the program as Batman and Robin. Not a single episode failed to showcase Bruce and Dick’s lifestyle as a rich playboy and his ward, and Bruce Wayne’s reputation as a philanthropist lady’s man was frequently brought up. Though Wayne and Grayson were often played to be just as ridiculous as Batman and Robin – particularly because of the faintly

incestuous overtones applied to their relationship – their presence nonetheless served to bring some elements of ‘ordinary life’ to a superhero program. In addition, creators would occasionally allow moments of semi-serious drama to creep into the program, usually revolving around Wayne/Batman’s doomed relationship with Catwoman, to whom he was attracted despite her criminal tendencies. Thus, though the *Batman* program was certainly a comedy, its intentional appeal to adults through the use of live actors instead of animation, sophisticated irony and the occasional insertion of drama and pathos must be seen as one step in the superhero’s increasing adoption of modern melodrama.

The 1970s saw a few more, and more melodramatic, live-action superhero products. On television, *Wonder Woman* (1975-79), *Spider-Man* (1977-79) and the *Hulk* (1979-82) each became the star of their own live-action program, followed later by an original, non-licensed superhero program *The Greatest American Hero* (1981-83). *Superman*, a full-length, dramatic superhero motion picture,<sup>77</sup> was released into theatres in 1978 to much critical attention for one of its creators, *Godfather* scribe Mario Puzo, and the marquee actors filling out some supporting roles (Gene Hackman, Glenn Ford and, surprising many, Marlon Brando). Unlike the *Batman* show, these products told superhero-themed stories in a ‘straight-ahead’ style, rather than a principally self-mocking or ironic one. The label ‘straight-ahead’ is not meant to signify particularly grave or solemn story-telling, since all the products – especially

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<sup>77</sup> 1951’s *Superman and the Mole-Men* was the first non-serialized live-action superhero product, but ran less than one hour and was less a film than a kind of pilot for the planned television program which began airing in 1952.

*Wonder Woman* and *The Greatest American Hero* – relied to varying degrees on humour that was, in some instances, self-mocking, continuing William Dozier’s tactic for drawing adult viewers, if in somewhat less kitschy style. But whereas *Batman* worked as a particular style of comedic program, the superhero programs and movies of the 1970s and 1980s worked within established logics and tropes of the dramatic genre intended to excite rather than amuse, including only occasional moments of humour.

Looking at those products now it seems evident that superheroic motifs such as inhuman powers, secret identities and colourful costumes were taken as inherently undermining of attempts to tell serious, dramatic stories – a fundamental difference from what I have been referring to as modern melodrama. I make this assertion because almost all of these dramatic programs limited those elements to small chunks of each episode, using them to punctuate the story-telling rather than serving as a central focus, thus allowing more standard story-telling in adult-aimed television programs.<sup>78</sup> The superhero sequences were usually used as *deus ex machina* devices, providing unusual means for the protagonist to unearth some new piece of information or, most often, to defeat and capture the villain.

The division between superheroic and non-superhero sequences was reinforced by the manner in which the heroes themselves were visually bifurcated from their secret identities, continuing the tradition of what I referred to above as the segmented superhero. In the

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<sup>78</sup> Of course this method also reduced the cost of the products, since expensive superhero-special effects were required less frequently.

Superman and Wonder Woman products, the civilian identity was marked off through visual and personality cues. Both Clark Kent and Diana Prince wore large glasses, dressed primly and neatly and acted in a shy and reserved (and in Kent's case, bumbling) manner. These traits were all countered in the costumed identity by confident attitudes and mannerisms, willingness to engage in verbal exchanges and physical confrontations with others, even to the point of flirtation with objects of romantic interest.

The Marvel characters were more drastically bifurcated since, in both the Hulk and Spider-Man programs, each identity was portrayed by a different *actor*. When body-builder Lou Ferrigno appeared on-screen in green body-paint viewers knew to expect little if any interaction with other characters. The Hulk roared, destroyed property and saved innocents but did not develop plot-lines or assist in character development – those had to wait for the return of David Banner, played by Bill Bixby. Spider-Man's full mask meant that anyone could wear the costume, which made it easier for the show's producers to use stuntmen any time Spider-Man, and not Peter Parker, was on-screen. Unlike the Hulk and David Banner, Parker and Spider-Man shared equivalent height and body-mass, but their bodies were still used in very different manners. While Parker stood, walked and generally moved in 'normal' fashion, Spider-Man did not, even when not climbing walls. Spider-Man rarely stood upright, affecting instead a half-crouch with legs spread and arms akimbo, fingers

splayed. While Parker held and turned his head in a normal manner, Spider-Man's head was usually cocked at a 45 degree angle and, turned in sudden jerks.<sup>79</sup> And, of course, it was only Spider-Man, not Parker, who climbed walls, fought villains or swung from webs. In all of these instances, the effect was a visual separation of the hero's two identities, which worked to reinforce the segmentations going on in other story-telling registers.

In these products, the superhero sequences were typically isolated from others not only visually, but also in that most non-action storytelling (character or emotional development, dialogue, etc.) was effectively put on hold when the superhero appeared and was taken up again only once the hero returned to their civilian identity. This is important because it clearly identifies how creators saw their particular products vis-a-vis the melodramatic genre: superheroes might add some spice, but for the most part, had to be relegated to the background when trying to tell adult-aimed stories. As with comics of the period (and until that point), these superhero products allowed virtually no interpenetration of the superhero and civilian lives of the characters, completely cutting off the superhero aspects of the product from its melodramatic aspects. This was likely seen as the only way to do popular, dramatic entertainment at the time.

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<sup>79</sup> This Spider-Man moved in similar, if less exaggerated, fashion as the Spider-Man on the children's program *The Electric Company*, which aired 5 years prior to the adult-oriented drama. It is likely that both programs were trying to reproduce one of Spider-Man's tropes, as these awkward poses were long established within the comics. It would be interesting to ask creators of the drama how much, if at all, they based their direction of their Spider-Man on the only other live-action version of the character to that point in time.

*The Greatest American Hero* was an interesting exception to that trend during the same period, though. An hour-long drama that premiered in 1981 and aired for 3 seasons, the program was unique for featuring an original superhero, not a licensed one. The stories center on Ralph Hinkley, a normal human being, who in the pilot is visited by a large UFO and given a super-powered suit with an instruction booklet and the vague direction to help humanity. He promptly loses the booklet and is forced to learn what the suit can do, and how to do it, through trial-and-error. Therefore, unlike the other live-action superhero products of the time, a recurring source of humour and action here was the hero's inability effectively to use his powers. Stephen Cannel, the series creator, explains (*The Greatest American Hero - The Complete Series* DVD collection, Disc 9) that when he accepted the ABC network's request to do a superhero show, he did so with the primary goal that the show highlight and critique elements of the human condition and with little concern for staying true to the tropes of the superhero genre. His only interest in the idea of super-powers arose from the question "what would you or I do if we were given a super suit from outer space... in your real life, what would happen? It would ruin your life! Spandex suit, jockey underwear... what would you tell your girlfriend when she sees you? I'd be dead!". In an effort to emphasize this "realistic" approach to the idea of the superhero, Cannel wrote Hinkley as a completely normal person, with no grand sense of justice or of personal mission, who, once given the suit, is more often confused and embarrassed by it than joyful.

*Greatest American Hero* therefore occupied a unique position among the superhero programs and movies of the time because of the degree to which it eschewed superhero tropes

and, as a result, did not segment the superhero in the manner of the other shows. The superhero persona was so minimized in this program that it never received a name. Characters refer to the suit and to Hinckley, but never to a superheroic persona of any kind. This was emphasized by the suit which, although clearly of superheroic style with red shiny tights and tunic with a black cape, had no head or facial covering at all. Since Hinkley did not wear glasses, he became the only superhero outside of comics whose face did not change at all when he put on his costume. Unlike the Hulk and Spider-Man, his body and bodily attitude did not change either (except when in the prone flying position or performing other special-effects driven actions). More importantly, his attitude did not change either, as he had no scary or inspirational or other superheroic persona to contrast with his everyday one. Being the same character, Ralph Hinckley, whether in costume or not, made him the only superhero of the time who was not drastically segmented in some respect. In this respect *Greatest American Hero* was ahead of its time, since, as I argue below, that is a trend that only became common in superhero products two decades later.

## **Conclusion**

The superhero products of this period seem to have been intended to attract both adult and, in some cases, younger audiences. The tone of the television programs and, to lesser degree, the comics, would vary between serious and somewhat self-mocking, although they always remained anchored in a straight-ahead story-telling mode. And, like the comics that inspired them, the television programs always featured segmented superheroes. These early

intrusions into melodrama spanned the first forty years of the superhero's existence; their next forty years would see that shift accelerate, as I detail in the following chapter.

# 5 Superheroes and Melodrama (1970s – Present Day)

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In this chapter I continue my review of superhero products and their increasingly melodramatic character, focusing on developments since the 1970s that have pushed the genre firmly into the category I called ‘modern melodrama’ in the previous chapter. I begin by reviewing the work of two comic writers, Chris Claremont and Marv Wolfman, which was among the first to foreground melodrama in superhero comics. I trace melodrama through changes to superhero comics in the 1980s, 90s and 2000s, marking the spread of the ‘desegmented superhero’ and the resulting move of superhero comics into modern melodrama. I present another ‘thick description’ of a superhero comic that, in this case, illustrates the contemporary, highly melodramatic character of the genre, and reflect on how this implementation of the autoethnographic method affects the ‘believability’ of my claims. I then move to examine the explosive growth of melodramatic superheroes on television and in film.

## **Superhero melodrama in the 1970s and 80s: superhero teams**

In the previous chapter, I left off discussing melodrama in superhero comics in the 1960s, focusing on how some of Marvel’s superheroes mobilized more melodrama than had most earlier superhero comics. That discussion focused in part on the Fantastic Four, a ‘superhero family’ whose members did not maintain secret identities from one another or the public.

Now I propose that the Fantastic Four served as a model for the two ‘runs’ in superhero comics that are widely seen as the epitome of melodrama: Chris Claremont’s time as writer of Marvel’s *Uncanny X-Men* (1975-1991) and Marv Wolfman’s time as writer of DC’s *The New Teen Titans* (1980-1996). The hundreds of comics created by these writers – and the artists, inkers and other creators involved in all comic creation – were melodramatic to a far higher degree than earlier superhero comics (including *Fantastic Four*), a change I believe was possible mainly due to their focus on superhero teams, whose members could engage in ‘ordinary’ relationships with one another to a degree not possible for the more popular, and common, ‘lone’ superheroes like Superman and Spider-Man.

I touched on Claremont’s work on *X-men* in chapter three, when discussing the comic-based shift from episodic to serialized story-telling. As I noted there, Claremont’s work was known for including very drawn-out ‘B-’ or ‘C-plots’, character-based story-lines that, unlike the main ‘superhero battles villain’ A-plots of most superhero comics, did not climax and wrap up each issue.<sup>80</sup> Instead, these subsidiary plots continued from one issue to the next, sometimes for years, taking advantage of the ‘decompressed’ story-telling space of serialization to hint at relationships, problems and growing dangers among team-mates, rather than dealing with the external threats provided by villains. It was these subsidiary plots that granted Claremont’s work its highly melodramatic flavour, since it was within

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<sup>80</sup> Eventually, even Claremont’s A-plots were stretched across many issues, contributing to the spread of serialization throughout superhero comics, as I discussed in chapter 3.

these small lulls between ‘action set pieces’ that characters could interact in ways other than fighting. Characters argued, fell in love, expressed their fears and engaged in other kinds of emotional displays, raising the emotional content of the story and thereby provided readers with increased opportunity for emotional engagement with the story and characters. As Wright puts it, “Claremont and [artist John] Byrne also added nuances to the interplay of the characters that made for an especially compelling and absorbing narrative” (Wright 2001, 263). Marv Wolfman and his longtime collaborator George Perez did much the same on their comic, *The New Teen Titans*, another team-book featuring the junior-partners, or sidekicks (such as Robin and Wonder Girl), of older superheroes. *Teen Titans* also presented readers with long, drawn out melodramatic plots and sub-plots, and also enhanced its melodramatic flavour by emphasizing the somewhat volatile, sometimes passionate relationships that could spring up among the relatively young cast of principal characters.

It seems to me that the reason these creators were able to craft such melodramatic stories with these characters is that they could engage in melodramatic moments in ways that other, loner superheroes could not, thanks to the personal engagements afforded them through membership on a team. Like the Fantastic Four before them, these heroes were unencumbered by secret-identities when it came to interacting with each other, and therefore were ‘allowed’ within the logic of the story to reveal personal secrets, fears, feelings and so on. This was quite different from the ‘rules’ surrounding the secret-identities of most, and the most popular, superheroes of the period, since those stories often relied on the preservation of the secret-identity and any related secrets, for dramatic effect (as I discuss in

more detail below). Whereas most superheroes of the time were segmented by their secret-identities, Claremont's and Wolfman's characters were, within the logic of their stories, the first *de-segmented* superheroes: even if they maintained secret identities to the public, they did not amongst each other.

The works of Claremont and Wolfman are important in the history of the development of melodrama in superhero comics, since they featured some of the most consistently melodramatic stories in that history. But they are also important in that they show the way that, in decades to follow, all superheroes would have to follow in order to also reach similar melodramatic heights: one of the central tropes of the superhero genre, the secret identity, would have to be fractured and minimized.

### **Superhero comics since the 1980s: more ordinary, still extraordinary**

In the 1980s superhero comics entered what is colloquially referred to as a 'grim and gritty', or deconstructionist period which, though short-lived, provided more impetus to their transition toward melodrama. That period saw fast growth in the popularity of anti-heroes, dark, brooding characters who were very unlike their superhero predecessors in that they tended not to wear bright colors or engage in banter, often carried (very large) guns and, on occasion, killed in battle. In this respect, superhero comics were following a trend embraced more widely in popular culture, particularly in Hollywood, during the 1970s, as fear of violent crime in the United States drew audiences away from traditionally heroic characters and towards those, like Clint Eastwood's character in *Dirty Harry* (1971) or Charles Bronson's

in *Death Wish* (1974), willing to kill criminals whether legally sanctioned or not. The period is also called 'deconstructive' because of a popular belief at the time that the prevalence of anti-heroes, as well as other developments in the field, indicated a drastic reconceptualization of the core values, defining boundaries and central tropes of the superhero and the entire genre. For the most part that is an exaggeration, as very few comics of the period can be said to have attempted or succeeded at such lofty goals; at most, they reinserted some of the violence and wantonness excised from superhero comics by the Comics Code<sup>81</sup> in the 1950s, changing, but hardly redefining, the superhero.<sup>82</sup>

Both labels, or rather the trends within superhero story-telling they refer to, can be traced in large measure to the aging field and its fans. As Warren Ellis, one popular and important comic writer once put it on his personal website, "the truth of any current superhero 'hit' is that they're about the audience's relationship with old characters" (Ellis

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<sup>81</sup> The Comics Code is maintained by the Comics Code Authority (CCA), a self-regulating and self-censoring agency created in 1954 by comics and magazine publishers who had come together as the larger Comics Magazine Association of America, all in response to widespread criticism of comics as creators of childhood delinquency at the time. The criticism came most loudly and famously from the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency which held hearings in New York in the early 1950s at which various comics creators and publishers were publically accused of producing material harmful to the characters of American children. The CCA held strong authority over superhero comic publications until the early 2000s, at which point DC and Marvel, the largest superhero comic publishers and only ones still following the Code, abandoned it. For a very thorough overview of the creation, use and general history of the Code, see Nyberg 2002.

<sup>82</sup> Iain Thompson (2005) argues successfully that one mini-series, *Watchmen* did "accomplish this coming of age [for superhero comics]... not by celebrating the development of its heroes, but rather by developing its heroes precisely in order to deconstruct the very idea of a hero, overloading and thereby shattering this idealized reflection of humanity and so encouraging us to reflect upon its significance from the many different angles of the shards left lying on the ground" (101). It can be argued that some other works, such as Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore and Curt Swan's *Whatever Happened to Superman?* achieved similar results through different paths. However, on the whole, the 'deconstruction' of this period is more myth than reality.

2005). Though the popular conception of superheroes has always been that they appeal uniquely to children, the bulk of comic buyers by the 1980s were adults who had discovered the genre as children and never lost interest in it. These fans grew not only into adult consumers, but creators as well, different from previous generations of comic creators because they were the first to have grown up consuming the product and entered the field with emotional investments in it already established. Creators and consumers wanted stories featuring their beloved characters but interesting enough to hold their attention, not only the attention of a child. Over the late 1970s and 1980s, then, superhero comics, through a variety of influences, changed in numerous ways to cater to these adult audiences. I am interested in how this contributed to the longer-term inclusion of melodrama.

### **Grim and gritty**

1980s superheroes were best known for being brutal and brooding, displaying far more relish for punishing criminals than did their predecessors. As well, and more important for my argument, these anti-heroes were written as very introspective, making this a period when comics were dominated by what I call 'internal monologues'. Used much in the same manner as first-person narration in fiction, internal monologues in comics consist of text, delivered originally in thought-balloons and later in caption boxes, conveying the thoughts of the central character (on occasion, other characters also engage in internal monologues as well). Typically these thoughts will be used for a variety of story-telling ends including explaining difficult plot points to readers, reminding them of earlier events, providing color-

commentary on action in the comic, and more. But what separates internal monologues from common narration and simpler thoughts is their ongoing, self-dueling nature and what they reveal about the internal struggles (or lack thereof) of the central character. In effect, internal monologues became to superhero stories in the 1970s and after what dialogue is to most melodrama: the principal device through which creators complicate plot and action, having characters debate the factual, moral and other possible consequences of their actions in general and particular to that story. As discussed in the previous chapter, traditional melodrama centers around discussion among characters; the difficulty faced by superhero creators at the time was the necessarily solitary nature of their characters who, thanks to their firmly-maintained dual identities (what I called their fully-segmented nature in the previous chapter), had few people with whom they could engage in such discussions. Added to this was the accepted idea that superheroes should, prior to shifts in the 1980s, always be moral paragons, implying that they should rarely if ever face moral or other quandaries about their actions. The result was that, prior to the late 1970s and the early stages of this grim and gritty phase in the 1980s, superheroes rarely articulated their insecurities in long, drawn-out disquisitions.<sup>83</sup>

The growth of this new characteristic of the superhero contributed to the genre's shift toward what I termed modern melodrama in the previous chapter. Internal monologues

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<sup>83</sup> The glaring exception, though there are other less glaring ones, is Spider-Man, for whom such angsty thoughts has always been a central characteristic.

provided readers with more of the superhero for consideration: rather than just their appearance and physical actions, readers were now able to access the characters' innermost thoughts, concerns and even fears. In short, the character of the superhero was fleshed out in new ways during this transition, and this increased robustness of character was a necessary step on the road from being primarily an adventure or action genre, to being melodramatic.

The grim and gritty era of superhero comics attained its zenith – or lowest point, depending on one's perspective – with the hypermasculine superheroes created by a new publisher, Image Comics. Image was formed in 1992 by a group of established comic writers and artists who left both Marvel and DC simultaneously, claiming frustration over the historical lack of control enjoyed by creators over their own work while employed for either of those publishers. Image was a kind of experiment, the first comics-exclusive publisher that was creator-owned and at which creators retained rights over their creations. The experiment proved immediately successful as, during the 1990s, Image comics often outsold Marvel and DC superhero comics. Image comics quickly became known for several qualities, story-quality not one of them. As Jeffrey A. Brown (1999) asserts, "Image's very name suggests the extremes that their stylized portrayals of masculinity have taken as pure form, as pure image. Image provides hypermasculine ideals that are more excessively muscular than Superman or Batman ever dreamed of being. The Image heroes set a new standard of hypermasculinity. In fact, Image has frequently done away with the superhero's mild-mannered alter ego all together" (Brown 1999, 33). The artists who founded Image and drew its earliest comics were known not for realistic, fluid or well composed drawings, but

for art in which male and female figures were inflated to ridiculous proportions and drawn almost exclusively in 'pose-downs', positions similar to those struck by body-builders which are meant to emphasize flexed muscles during competitions. Men were continually flexing biceps bigger than their heads, which sat absurdly small over necks with dozens of bulging tendons, all supported by thighs wider than their torsos. Women were possibly drawn even more absurdly, with legs twice as long as their torsos and hips, waists and breasts which would have confounded the designers of the Barbie doll. Rarely muscled, women were drawn as lithe and with costumes covering just fractions of their out-of-proportion bodies.

As Brown points out, Image's characters rarely had alter-egos.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, those characters were often still engaged in somewhat melodramatic storytelling.<sup>85</sup> Protagonists were almost exclusively anti-heroes, heavy on brooding and violence, some of whom engaged in almost endless introspection through internal monologue. In addition, the lack of dual identities meant that, in order for creators to present their superheroes engaged in anything other than battle, those characters (particularly those in comics about superhero teams) interacted with other superheroes as friends or loved ones. This meant that, contrary to the historical pattern of most DC and Marvel superheroes – most of whom spent their time

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<sup>84</sup> While this was novel it was not unique to Image, as Marvel was also finding great success with some of its anti-heroes – Wolverine, Cable and the Punisher in particular.

<sup>85</sup> It should be mentioned that, once this 'Image style' of superhero art and stories proved quite popular, both Marvel and DC imitated it to varying degrees. Thus, these comments reflect upon superhero comics in general in the 1990s, not just on Image's comics.

hiding their dual identity from friends and loved ones – the new anti-heroes discussed the full range of their lives, thoughts and emotions with those closest to them. So while they are best remembered for their overinflated and oversexualized physiques, Image’s anti-heroes (among other anti-heroes) were importantly innovative in pushing the superhero genre further toward the melodramatic mold.

Other changes to mainstream comics during the mid-1980s reinforced the shift in story-telling towards darker, more ominous fare. Investment in new printing technologies allowed first DC, and then Marvel, to use a larger variety of colors and color blends on higher quality paper, resulting in new possibilities for images that were literally darker (and yet clear), richer and sharper than had possible using earlier printing technologies.

Simultaneously, as mainstream publishers recognized adult-audience interest in superhero comics, they experimented with new binding formats, resulting in the first superhero graphic novels and trade-paperbacks (discussed in chapter one). In this instance, content and form interacted to complement each other: while the quality and desirability of darker, grimmer superhero comics can and has been debated, it was certainly the case that those characteristics appealed enough to audiences of the time to have become the overriding motifs of the genre.

### **1990s-2000s: De-segmentation and beyond**

Though grim and gritty superhero stories began, around the end of the 1980s, to be supplanted by other, less dark kinds of stories, some of the changes introduced to the genre during the 1980s flourished. Most notable for my purposes was the continued fracturing of

the secret identity, or what I will refer to as the 'de-segmenting' of the figure of the superhero.

In chapter three I analyzed an early issue of *Action Comics* in order to explain how the version of Superman presented in it was, as I termed it, 'fully segmented' – acting completely differently in each of his two identities in order to hide his dual identity from others. I then argued and illustrated that most superhero stories from then on and through the 1970s, both inside and outside comics, followed that same model by presenting fully-segmented principal characters. While in the earliest Superman comics there was a sense that Superman maintained his secret identity in order to laugh surreptitiously at Lois Lane, eventually the secret identity became understood as the only way a superhero could maintain a 'normal' life separate from his fantastic abilities, while also protecting his loved ones from attack by his enemies. This justification, and the secrets and lies it necessitated on the part of the superhero, were all plot devices used by creators for two important ends. First as a source of dramatic tension, since many stories hinged on the superhero's attempts to fight crime while preserving his secret identity. Second, to preserve the superhero's 'relationship status-quo' and thereby enhance the oneiric climate (discussed in chapter three). Because the secret identity superseded all other demands on the superhero's personal life, he could never fully engage in an open, trusting relationship with others. Anytime a relationship, particularly a romantic one, had a chance of moving forward, that progress would be halted either by the revelation of the secret identity – upsetting the potential partner who would have to therefore end the relationship – or, more often, by the superhero's frequent, mysterious

disappearances and contradictory behaviours which evoked distrust in the other.

Superheroes engaged in countless apologies and reassurances to partners over the decades, all the while wishing (usually in internal monologues) they could find some way to negotiate their romances and their greater responsibilities to the public. The simultaneous effect, as Brown argues (Brown 1999, 31), was that while superheroes were undefeatable while battling evil in costume, they had feet of clay in civilian clothing, facing frustration and powerlessness at almost every personal and romantic turn.

All of this began to change toward the end of the period I covered in chapter three. In 1972, two authors performed an early analysis of superhero comics in which they asserted that “what is not going to change in the foreseeable future is the rigid convention of giving superheroes a secret identity... [t]he superhero divides himself into two component parts, each playing its role: the alter ego and a secret identity” (Reitberger and Fuchs 1972, 124). As it turned out, their prediction held true for about a decade: comic creators began to experiment with fracturing the secret identity around the late 1980s. As a result, though it remained an integral part of the genre, the secret identity began filling new and differing functions within superhero stories, allowing creators new avenues to stretch the melodramatic nature of the genre.

To some degree the desegmenting of the superhero was facilitated by the ascendancy of anti-heroes during the ‘grim and gritty’ period of superhero comics, since, as I argued above, many of them had virtually no private lives to speak of, and so had little in the way of secret identities to protect, performing their (often questionably) superheroic acts with no

costumes or masks, in full public view (again, Marvel characters Wolverine, Cable and the Punisher were three of the most popular such characters of the time). But in 1984 those relatively new anti-heroes were joined by 'traditional' superhero Spider-Man when Peter Parker's sometime-girlfriend, Mary Jane Watson, revealed that she had long known he was Spider-Man (DeFalco and Frenz 1984). This immediately changed the tenor of their friendship, since Watson was no longer another 'civilian' from whom Parker had to hide his secret. Instead, she became his confidante, one of the few people with whom Parker enjoyed a relationship in which the details of his superhero activities could be talked about. Such conversations often followed a standard pattern in which Peter would, either off-handedly or angrily, recount a fight with an enemy to which Watson would react fearfully and with great concern – a pattern which cannot be said to have illustrated great depth in these characters or their emotional responses. Nevertheless, this was something new to the genre and it opened new possibilities for dramatic interaction beyond the relationships that had constituted the genre for so long (hero/enemy, hero/paramour, etc.). Their close friendship maintained this pattern for three years until the characters were married in 1987, making Spider-Man one of the first and few superheroes to become married, and the first to marry a non-superhero (Shooter, Michelinie et al. 1987).<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> If one discounts marriages which were either 'out of continuity' (i.e. one of the 'imaginary stories' I described in chapter two), plots by supervillains which were quickly annulled, or other similar story-device weddings, only three marriages preceded Parker and Watson's, and all of them were between superheroes: Ant Man and

By the 1990s the Hulk, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern, the Flash and countless other superheroes were revealing their dual identities to the public, or at least to their loved ones. Even Superman could not resist this new trend of openness, ending over fifty years of romantic cat-and-mouse when he revealed his secret to Lois Lane in a 1991 comic, five years prior to marrying her. What is significant about these changes, beyond the fracturing of what had been, to that point, a foundational trope of the genre, is the new avenues for storytelling they opened for creators. Superheroes and their paramours were no longer limited to evasions and broken-hearts; instead, they could openly discuss not only their relationship but the impact on it (and vice versa) of the superhero's alternate identity and dangerous life. Much like Ang pointed out about *Dallas* in my previous chapter, it was at this point that the public life of the superhero could be imported into the personal lives of the story's characters, allowing them to tackle related topics in conversation. This, then, allowed the genre to embrace characteristics 3 and 4 of modern melodrama I identified in the previous chapter: paying attention to everyday, mundane experiences (such as discussions of the ups and downs of one's relationships with others, or the 'events' of one's day) and a focus on storytelling about and, whenever possible, through the lens of personal relationships.

Ultimately it is the shift from the fully-segmented to the desegmented superhero – a shift facilitated by the increased serialization of superhero stories I explored in chapter three

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the Wasp (Thomas and Buscema 1969), Mr. Fantastic and the Invisible Woman (Lee and Kirby 1965) and Aquaman and Mera (1964).

– that was most important in the turning of superhero genre away from its adventure and science-fiction roots, toward modern melodrama. As I pointed out above, the desegmentation began earlier, in two superhero-team comics of the 1970s and 80s, *Uncanny X-Men* and *The New Teen Titans*. However, it took some years for desegmentation to reach beyond those team-based comics to the more popular, more widely-read and more typical superhero stories that revolve around such lone heroes as Spider-Man, Superman, the Flash, Green Lantern and the Hulk, who did not have teammates with whom they shared personal relationships. In this manner, modern melodrama spread through superhero comics very slowly, beginning with certain products and only later spreading throughout the entire field.

As I did in the previous chapter, I turn now to review one contemporary Superman story as one example of how melodramatic effects can be achieved in superhero comics.

### **The melodrama of the desegmented superhero (comic)**

The next section, an analysis of the story published in *Action Comics* #869 (Johns and Frank 2008), is intended to describe the ways in which this comic embraced melodramatic motifs and to demonstrate, using this as one sample of superhero comics, that they have indeed become far more melodramatic than they were in their earliest days (as represented by *Action* #5, reviewed in the previous chapter).

The cover-art of this comic immediately indicates a high likelihood of melodrama within its pages. The cover informs us that this issue is part four of a serialized story, meaning the benefits of serialized/ expanded story-telling discussed in chapter three are at

play in this comic. The scene depicted on the cover also conveys a concern with relationships, much more than with action or fantasy. In the foreground stand Clark Kent and his adoptive human father Jonathan, leaning on a fencepost and engaged in casual and smiling conversation. It is night and behind the two men can be seen a darkening sky, fields of wheat (the senior Kents own a small farm) and Kent's mother and Lois Lane standing on a porch, also smiling. Kent, in a total reversal of the separation and protection of identities emphasized in the Superman comic discussed earlier, is wearing glasses, jeans and an open shirt, under which can clearly be seen his Superman costume. The scene is one of casual comfort, of loved ones sharing a moment that, for the most part, could be enjoyed by anyone. The only fantastic element apparent on the cover is a small moon recessed in the background, half of which has the face of the issue's villain, the robot Brainiac.

The issue concludes a multi-part story in which the villain, Brainiac, has miniaturized the city of Metropolis and taken the miniature onto his space-ship. Superman has learned that Brainiac has committed the same act on thousands of planets, including stealing the city of Kandor from Superman's home world of Krypton some years before Superman's birth.<sup>87</sup> As this issue begins, Brainiac has imprisoned both Superman and his cousin Kara, Supergirl, on his ship and plans to complete his usual pattern: having stolen one city, Brainiac will

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<sup>87</sup> These elements of the story have appeared before in Superman comics, in each instance coming as a revelation to Superman and other characters as it does in this issue. This story is, therefore, an iteration of previous stories, a topic I explored in chapter two.

destroy the rest of the planet in order to become the sole 'proprietor' of its knowledge and cultures.

The comic contains three distinguishable story-lines which are presented in an overlapping manner: Superman's struggle against Brainiac; Supergirl's struggle to free herself from Brainiac's ship and prevent it from destroying the sun; and the senior Kents, on their farm, reacting to extreme weather changes that have been caused by Brainiac's ship's attack on the sun. All three story-lines present readers with character interaction and written and visual expressions of emotion, thus with melodramatic qualities.

Superman's struggle with Brainiac is the central story-line and, as such, contains the most violence. What makes the 'fight scenes' of this product particularly melodramatic, as opposed to being primarily oriented toward the action genre, is their punctuation by moments of intense, sparse and quiet dialogue. The scenes contain very traditional elements of superhero stories, such as Superman's temporary immobility due to physical restraint by a metallic strait-jacket. Over the three pages during which Superman is Brainiac's prisoner, Brainiac expostulates in traditional super-villain form, disparaging Superman and the humans he protects for various kinds of weakness. Until he frees himself, Superman argues with Brainiac, defending humanity verbally. Both interlocutors convey charged emotion – Brainiac, disgust and scorn, Superman, righteous anger and concern – but the emotion is not conveyed through raised voices or hysterics; rather, the lettering used for all dialogue between Brainiac and Superman is of a size and quality (rarely bolded, enlarged, or in any color other than black) which comic readers would recognize as 'normal' talk. These

emotionally charged interactions build until Superman rips himself free of the metal strait-jacket and can begin to express his built-up anger at Brainiac through physical violence. The violence, on its own, might exemplify a product of the action genre. But the quiet, almost intimate verbal interactions that precede the violence grant it a personal quality, one much more representative of the melodramatic genre. The comic's creators also engage in heavy usage of close-ups to emphasize the melodramatic character of the story. Part of Brainiac's process when stealing cities is to miniaturize them, and then seal them inside a 'protective system' – effectively, a bottle. In the scene just described, Lois Lane, who was in Metropolis when it was stolen by Brainiac, is standing on a rooftop and watching the full-size Superman (to whom she is married) struggle against the bonds holding him. Miniaturized, she speaks to him as she watches him struggle, telling him that she knows the end may be near and that she loves him. Each panel in which she is speaking moves progressively closer in on her face, until her eyes fill up the entire panel. This close-up process is capped by a close-up on Superman's eyes, who then manages to break the bonds holding him and confront Brainiac. Though Superman never speaks, the visual progression conveys to the reader both what is happening (Superman can hear and even see Lois, thanks to his enhanced senses) and the emotional intensity of a loving relationship: Lois is scared that this is the end and Superman hears her fear and is motivated to action by it. This foregrounding of a spousal relationship in the midst of a confrontation between superhero and supervillain lends the segment a melodramatic quality not present in the 1938 Superman story reviewed above or, indeed, any (or a majority of) superhero stories prior to the late 1990s.

During a short lull in his battle with Brainiac, Superman locates Supergirl in another part of Brainiac's ship and charges her with the task of stopping the ship from destroying the sun. Their interaction is short, but plays out in panels of alternating close-ups on each of their faces, mimicking the close-ups of television and film and that were not part of the early Superman comic discussed above. When Supergirl tells Superman she is afraid to fail, a close-up focuses on her downcast and narrowed eyes, suggesting both her fear and the difficulty of her admission. The next close-up shows Superman with a relatively understanding and avuncular expression, as he tells his young cousin that "it's OKAY to be scared." The following two close-up panels contain no dialogue, focusing exclusively on Supergirl's facial responses to Superman's statement: wide-eyed shock in one panel, followed by set-jaw, scowling determination in the next. This sequence captures perhaps most succinctly the melodrama of this story. We have two characters who, while human (and good) looking, are super-powered aliens, wearing brightly-coloured costumes, talking about the possible explosion of the sun and immolation of the earth; and yet all of this context is temporarily downplayed in order to highlight a very human (if simplistic and trite) sentiment – fear is okay – and two very overt emotional reactions, presented visually in an exaggerated fashion. This blending of the ordinary and the extraordinary is exactly what was discussed by Ang and Brooks in the previous chapter, and what places the superhero so squarely within the entertaining genre of melodrama.

The third story-line of this issue, focusing on Superman's adoptive human parents, provides the issue with its melodramatic climax and conclusion. After defeating Brainiac,

Superman removes the miniaturized Metropolis from Brainiac's ship and returns it to its proper geographic location, where it regains its normal size. Returning to Brainiac's ship, Superman also discovers Kandor, the city stolen from Krypton before Superman's birth there. He flies this bottled city to Earth's north pole and joyfully watches it too resume its normal size, knowing he will now have the company of other Kryptonians on earth. This sequence is interspersed with panels in which the reader learns that while Brainiac had Superman imprisoned, he learned enough about Superman to know where his adoptive parents reside. Brainiac telepathically commands his ship to fire a bomb at the Kent home and, though the Kents survive the explosion, Jonathan Kent suffers a heart attack in its aftermath. Martha Kent calls out to Clark, knowing that his super-hearing will allow him to hear her. Because these scenes are interspersed with scenes of Superman's joy watching Kandor grow, the reader understands that although Superman would normally be able to hear his mother, the combination of the noise of Kandor's explosive growth and Superman's enthrallment in that growth leave him unaware of his mother's cries. Once Kandor is still, Superman finally hears his mother and races to her, arriving too late to save his father. The final page of the issue mimics its cover in that we see in the foreground the fence Clark and his father were leaning on, and in the background the Kent farmhouse. In the middle-ground is Superman, huddled over his mother, who is holding her husband's body. This tragic conclusion again blends the everyday (the loss of a parent) with the spectacular (the growth of an alien city on Earth, Superman's super-hearing).

This recent Superman story draws on and deploys modern, melodramatic tropes to tell its story, much more so than the story from 1938 discussed in chapter four. I selected this story in particular because, in addition to the script's emphasis on Superman's personal relationships, the style employed by penciller Gray Frank contributed greatly to the melodramatic flavour. Frank's style emphasizes realistic (though heavily muscled) superheroic figures, as well as highly detailed, emotionally-expressive faces and close-ups. Frank also took care throughout his work in *Action Comics* to give his Superman a notable resemblance to Christopher Reeve, the actor most favorably associated with that character after having played him in the first four Superman films. These elements of Frank's style brought to his Superman comics, and this issue in particular, striking evocations of a very human, 'realistic' Superman, one on whom emotional expressiveness was very effectively mapped. Though the other characters in this issue did not bear clear resemblance to real people, all were drawn with similar emphasis on emotive close-ups. The overall effect of the script and dialogue were highly evocative, a factor I attribute largely to the melodramatic notes of the story I have described.

It should be noted that not all contemporary comic creators write like Johns or draw like Frank, and I would be remiss in seeming to suggest that all contemporary superhero comics deploy melodrama in the same manner or to the same degree as does this one. In addition, by choosing my first example from the earliest days of superhero comics and my second example created by this team, I have deliberately chosen from the two extreme ends of what could be termed the 'melodramatic continuum' of superhero comics. I have made

these choices for the same reasons that I chose to use my space engaging in thick description of just a few examples, rather than using it to try and abstract data from among the hundreds of thousands of superhero comics published since 1938: my commitment to the autoethnographic approach. Other methods might have yielded different kinds of results; for example a content analysis might have been employed to chart historical increases in particular terms I might deem melodramatic. Should that method provide results in line with my claims, it might be perceived as more 'useful' than the method I have chosen, since those results would take the comfortable, quantifiable form demanded by traditional social science. But as I have already elaborated, the autoethnographic tradition, with its less scientific and more artistic commitments and its devotion to engaging readers through colorful, thick description, is the method that I have found most engaging and, as a result, most convincing. So it is the method I have used myself, knowing fully that I risk losing the faith of those readers interested mainly in 'data' that can be easily 'evaluated' as 'correct'. I only hope that my choice might have also earned for me the faith of other readers who are more interested in subjective, fully-engaged qualitative reasoning than in objective, detached quantitative reasoning.

In the next section I continue my argument about changing melodrama in superhero products, switching to non-comic examples. I continue to adhere to the autoethnographic method of thick description, but also cover a larger number of examples than discussed so far.

## Wider Audiences: Films and television

Director Tim Burton is widely credited for bringing about a new kind of superhero movie with 1989's live-action film *Batman*. That film completely ignored the kitschy Batman of the 1960s and the action/ romance/ comedy Superman films of the 1970s and 80s in order to produce the first gothically-styled, dark superhero film. Like the comics of the period, the film is literally quite dark, as most scenes take place at night and Batman himself makes no daytime appearances at all. Gotham City, created largely through special effects, is a city overrun by gothic architecture, drowning in its own gloom as criminals run rampant. The Joker is a newly created homicidal killer, murdering for fun. In this framework Batman is less a superhero than a mythic vigilante, hunted by police and feared by street criminals as 'the Bat' that seems to be bloodthirsty and indestructible. The dual identity trope features largely in the film, as Batman is not simply Bruce Wayne in a costume, but acts and speaks with entirely different voice and mannerisms, conveying more a schizoid personality than a masquerade. Parallel to all of these rather dark motifs, though, the film's creators did manage to insert one standard, perhaps unavoidable piece of Hollywood melodrama: lover's quarrels. At first, Wayne tries to keep his dual life a secret from his new girlfriend, reporter Vicky Vale (who, in a departure from established superhero history, is interested neither in discovering Batman's true identity nor in Batman romantically). In one short scene he tries to tell her but they bicker and are interrupted; in another equally short scene she learns the truth and they discuss their future in light of his dangerous activities. The scenes together make up roughly ten of the film's 126-minute running time, contributing little to the overall

effect of the film or its story. But they nevertheless constitute the first live-action portrayals of a desegmented superhero engaged in one kind of normal, everyday struggle that audiences are supposed to recognize as their own, and that is the meat of melodrama (complete with musical accompaniment in this case).<sup>88</sup> This is facilitated by the fracturing of one of the central tropes of the genre – the secret identity had to be revealed in order for the hero to have a frank, emotional discussion with his romantic partner.

By the mid-1990s, superhero comics were beginning a move away from ‘grim and gritty’, with the colorful costumes and non-lethal methods of traditional superheroes enjoying resurgence against dark, brooding anti-heroes. As mentioned above, at this time numerous superheroes that had long-held secret identities began ‘coming out’ to their significant others, further fracturing that trope and increasing the melodramatic potential of these established characters. Likely inspired by these changes, television creators once again became interested in the genre and created what was by far the most melodramatic superhero product to date, the television program *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* (1993). As the title implies, the focus of this program was the budding and troubled romance between Lois Lane and Clark Kent, with his costumed alter-ego’s adventures taking a reduced role. Though the program did feature supervillains, extraordinary powers and superheroic action in each episode, the driving conflict of the program was Clark Kent’s

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<sup>88</sup> I call these the first such scenes because despite romantic themes in the Superman films, Superman remained fully segmented and never engaged in similar, honest discussion with Lois Lane.

internal conflict as he struggled to maintain a secret identity that had the unfortunate effect of rendering the object of his affections completely uninterested in him. The program creators followed some of the changes made to Superman's background story in the 1980s reboot of the Superman comic-books (discussed in chapter three), having his parents survive into adulthood and, in virtually every episode, acting as a sounding-board for his various internal conflicts. These interactions, along with the many love triangles that epitomized the program, pushed it squarely into the realm of what I have called modern melodrama. *Lois and Clark* was more renowned for its leading-actor's handsomeness than either its dramatic or its superheroic qualities, and, failing to capitalize on the full potential of the superhero genre for exciting melodrama (unlike the products I discuss below), lasted only 4 seasons. Nevertheless, it contributed yet another push of the genre in the direction of melodrama by demonstrating, though its short-lived popularity, that superhero stories could be told in such a way as to entertain adult audiences interested in more than just superpowers and super-powered fights.

The 2000 film *X-Men* was more important, not only because it was the first in a wave of new and different licensed superhero films, but because it was the first non-comic-book superhero product completely to eschew the secret-identity trope as a central story-telling device. There are no secret identities in the film, just as there are no spandex costumes (having been replaced by tougher-looking leather 'team uniforms'), masks or, for the most part, codenames. Instead, viewers were introduced to a group of outcasts, mutants living in a world where human-mutation is a widely known and feared phenomenon among the non-

mutant human majority. Modeling the comics closely, the film featured the character of Professor Charles Xavier, secretly a telepath, is an activist for mutant rights and owns and runs a 'School for Gifted Youngsters' where young mutants can receive their education along with training in controlling their powers. The other central characters, the X-Men, are adults who, having grown up under the tutelage of the Professor now teach at the school and, when necessary, battle other, more evil and violent mutants. Though the film contains many scenes of fantastic powers and confrontations between good and evil, equally important are the relationships among the X-Men themselves, expressed primarily through dialogue. Professor X acts as surrogate father to the team; teammates Cyclops and Jean Grey are lovers despite Grey's newfound attraction to Wolverine; Wolverine has amnesia and must rely on Grey and the Professor to learn about himself, even as he bristles against the formal, authoritarian structure of team embodied by Cyclops as its operational leader; and the young girl Rogue, newly adopted by the team, struggles to control her powers, which put her teammates at risk, while trying to decide how she feels about joining a new 'family'. The teammates discuss, argue, embrace and occasionally fight amongst themselves and, while this behaviour is not new to X-Men stories (as discussed in chapter four), the film does mark the first popular non-comic superhero product to emphasize the importance of everyday relationships and their challenges amidst the world of superheroics.

As I illustrated in the opening chapter, *X-Men* marked the beginning of a highly successful period for non-comic superhero products. These range across film, television and other media and it is not possible for me to examine each of them in turn in order to review

their melodramatic characteristics. While some, like the 2006 film *Superman Returns*, stuck more closely to traditional superhero narratives by preserving the dual-identity and eschewing forays into melodramatic dialogue, most of the live-action superhero products since 2000 have embraced melodrama fully and fervently. The Iron Man films took perhaps the largest step away from tradition by having Tony Stark reveal his dual identity not just to his loved ones but to the public at large, announcing to the press “yeah, I’m Iron Man” at the end of the first film. The Spider-Man film trilogy had his sweetheart, Mary Jane, learn Peter’s secret towards the end of the second film, adding to the already heavily-melodramatic tone of those films which had, more than any other Spider-Man non-comic product, fully embraced Parker’s angsty, self-reflective and occasionally dour personality and sense of responsibility. The recently completed Batman trilogy took similar steps, with those closest to Batman learning his secret identity at various points throughout all three films, opening avenues for melodramatic moments concerned with family, friends and romance. *Daredevil* (2003), *Catwoman* (2004), *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009), *Captain America* (2011), *Thor* (2011), *Green Lantern* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), the rest of the X-Men films, both *Fantastic Four* films and both Hulk films featured virtually no secret-identity plotlines, embracing instead stories in which the protagonist(s) were forced to examine, wonder about and discuss their roles in the world with some friend or family-member. In short, since 2000’s *X-Men*, the clear trend among superhero films has been to eschew the ‘segmented superhero’ in favour of stories that bring together the ordinary and extraordinary elements of the superhero’s life, pushing them squarely into the domain of modern melodrama.

That trend has continued on television as well. *Heroes*, a television program about disparate individuals who suddenly gain super powers attained massive popularity during its first season, when it was advertised as a program about fantastic abilities, but not about superheroes. True to its word, the program featured no costumes, virtually no crime fighting and no secret-identity storylines. Though the individuals all struggled to keep their powers a secret from the public, they found others with whom to discuss their situation and the program consisted much more prominently of discussions and hand-wringing about *what to do* with those powers than actually doing anything with them. *Heroes* presented very little heroic action, choosing instead to emphasize the human-ness of its characters and their virtual inability to decide how to use their powers, if at all, towards any purpose. Soon after *Heroes* ended its run, two more superhero programs took its place: *The Cape* (2010) and *No Ordinary Family* (2010). Both, in their own way, placed the concerns of family relationships at the centre of their stories, managing in every episode to feature scenes and dialogue focused entirely on the everyday difficulties of family life and the complex relationships between married partners, between parents and their children and between siblings.

But the *sine non qua* of the melodramatic superhero products is arguably the television program *Smallville* (2001), which tells the story of Clark Kent growing up through high school and early adulthood as his powers begin to emerge. Though the program was never the most widely watched (or with the highest ratings), it maintained enough popularity to last ten years, far longer than most viewers, myself included, could anticipate. It seems to me that the principal reasons for the program's ongoing popularity were its melodramatic qualities.

That is, its ongoing narrative, with sub-plots that stretched across years in some cases, along with its constant attention to Clark Kent's personal, non-superheroic life and his struggle to maintain personal relationships of every kind, supplemented by the 'spicing' of larger-than-life villains, threats to personal and world safety and abilities, all of which combined to create a product that epitomizes the contemporary superhero figure and story-style.

This is not to say that *Smallville* was the best contemporary superhero product, as its quality fluctuated wildly over its ten year run. Rather, the point is that *Smallville* completely and firmly did away with the segmented superhero and its stories, discussed above. With this program and the rest of the contemporary superhero products just discussed, superhero stories found their way into a fully melodramatic mode, through which they have been able to reach new and wider audiences.

The combination of added melodramatic interactions with the gradual eschewal of the isolated, segmented superhero has resulted in superhero stories that, while still concerned with the extraordinary, have become more attentive to the ordinary. In an earlier chapter I discussed the appeal of limited novelty in serial entertainment, as contrasted with unlimited novelty; the same principle is at work in the appeal of the melodramatic superhero. Instead of presenting superheroes simply as people of unlimited extraordinary power, melodramatic stories emphasize the everyday problems and concerns that hamper these characters who remain, despite their amazing abilities, humans with issues. No matter how strong, invulnerable or amazing, the hero who has arguments with loved ones, feels confusion over

their role in the world and struggles to live up to their self-imposed sense of responsibility to others will always be recognizable to audiences.

## **Conclusion**

The last three chapters have argued that changes to the superhero genre – most prominently increasingly serialized story-telling and the desegmenting of the figure of the superhero – have resulted in more a melodramatic genre than it first appeared in 1939. In chapter four, I distinguished traditional forms of melodrama from more contemporary forms, and laid out five characteristics of modern melodrama. In this chapter, I demonstrated how superheroes have come, over time, to take on those five characteristics of modern melodrama. However, my argument is not simply that superheroes are one kind of modern melodrama.

By placing ordinary concerns within the larger framework of the superhero's life in which those concerns must compete for attention with threats that can affect millions of lives at a time, superhero stories create a third kind of melodrama, what I call superdrama. The next and final chapter of this work explains the nature of superdrama and its connection to aesthetic intensity in the superhero genre.

# 6 Experiencing Superheroes: Aesthetic Intensity and Superdrama

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In this chapter I bring various threads of this dissertation together in order to elucidate my perception of the aesthetic intensity of superheroes, and superdrama. I begin by discussing the concept of aesthetic intensity as elaborated by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. I present my understanding of aesthetic intensity, and highlight the epistemological principles it shares with my chosen method for this dissertation, autoethnography. I then work to extend and integrate this concept into some of the ways superheroes can be experienced, through an examination of superheroes, first in their stillness on the comic-page, and then in their movement. I also present two examples of ‘robust super-marketing’ that, I argue, successfully deploy some of the aesthetic intensity of the superhero. I end by reasserting the link between modern melodrama, aesthetic intensity, superdrama and my impression that superheroes have recently come to occupy new cultural spaces.

## **Aesthetic Intensity as Entertainment**

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht is a Stanford Professor in Literature whose interests lie with the elucidation of “phenomena and impressions of presence” and who asserts that “[r]ather than having to think, always and endlessly, what else there could be, we sometimes seem to connect with a layer in our existence that simply wants the things of the world close to our

skin” (Gumbrecht 2004, 105). Gumbrecht’s term for these physical, possibly galvanic experiences is aesthetic intensity, as when he asserts that “what we call ‘aesthetic experience’ always provides us with certain feelings of intensity that we cannot find in historically and culturally specific everyday worlds that we inhabit” (Gumbrecht 2004, 99). Though Gumbrecht does not connect aesthetic intensity to the consumption of popular culture, it seems to me that the consumption of popular culture cannot but be seen as an aesthetic experience, or at least as a seeking out of such experience. Not all instances of entertainment, by which I mean the consumption of popular culture for pleasure, are necessarily of this flavour. Nevertheless, I doubt that anyone who has ever experienced entertainment could deny that, some of the time, the experience we call entertainment is one that can elicit from us or instill in us feelings which, first, we would not otherwise have experienced in that moment, and, second, are not part of our normal everyday experiences. I discuss the particular and possibly unique ways superheroes facilitate such experiences below, after further elaboration of some key concepts.

One of the important sets of distinctions Gumbrecht elucidates is among different kinds of experience:

I do not believe [intellectual interpretations or higher degrees of self-reflexivity] should be considered as part of aesthetic experience... I prefer to speak, as often as possible, of ‘moments of intensity’ or of lived experience instead of saying ‘aesthetic experience’ – because most philosophical traditions associate the concept of experience with interpretation, that is, with acts of meaning attribution.... in contrast, I mean them in the strict sense of the phenomenological tradition, namely, as a being focused upon, as a thematizing of, certain objects of lived experience... Lived experience or *Erleben* presupposes that purely physical perception (*Wahrnehmung*) has already taken place, on the one hand, and that it will be followed by experience

(*Erfahrung*) as a result of acts of world interpretation, on the other (Gumbrecht 2004, 99)

Gumbrecht's goal is to isolate and elucidate *Wahrnehmung*; I draw on his analyses in what follows, but do not limit my discussion strictly to physical perceptions. Therefore, though I appreciate and wish to make clear the importance of physical perceptions in processes of reaction, interpretation and, ultimately, entertainment, I do not locate myself firmly within the phenomenological tradition as does Gumbrecht. It is not my goal to argue for the primacy of physical responses; rather, I want to ensure they are considered along with intellectual responses, because in practice they are both essential components of experiences of entertainment and, therefore, of superheroes.

Another difference lies in Gumbrecht's attention to 'lived experience', whereas my focus lies upon the consumer's experience of images – either moving or static – and texts/sounds that compose superhero products. The consumer's experiences are 'lived', but in a different way than, for example, Gumbrecht's analysis of athletes participating in a "beautiful play in a team sport" (Gumbrecht 2004, 113). Of course it is this precise difference, this involvement in/ lack of 'physical involvement' in the sense of running/ not running, jumping/ not jumping, reaching/ not reaching, etc., that makes study of 'entertainment' so traditionally separate from studies of 'sport' or other, more overtly physical forms of activity and response. But Gumbrecht's concern is not confined to 'physical' in the sense of full-body participation in physical activity. Reading, listening and studying paintings all qualify as aesthetic experiences, and ones which, like some more overtly physical activities, can be

understood as “specific moments of intensity” (Gumbrecht 2004, 96). What is important is not the physical activity of the actor, but rather their sensation of physicality as elicited by “the objects of fascination by which [moments of aesthetic intensity] are first activated and evoked” (Gumbrecht 2004, 101). It is not necessary to jump off buildings, teleport or outrun a cheetah in order to experience some kind of sense of physical involvement in and from the fiction of the superhero (though such activities would certainly enhance the involvement).

Gumbrecht’s conceptualization of aesthetic experience appeals to me for a number of reasons, not least of which is his eschewal of an older and more established understanding of such experiences as slow, long and primarily contemplative. I am thinking here particularly of the many cultural theorists of the early twentieth century for whom rational reflection was the *sine non qua* of aesthetic experience and the ultimate arbiter between superior ‘art’ and inferior ‘mass entertainment’ (and, often, those who consumed them).<sup>89</sup> For example, according to Theodor Adorno, a “fully concentrated and conscious experience of art” (Adorno 2002, 443) is only possible among people who are willing to expend mental effort when confronted by art, an experience precluded by mass-entertainment. Edward Shils argued that the intellectual and cultural elites had as a moral duty the diffusion of superior cultural products into mass society, in order to combat mass entertainment by inspiring “more fruitful use of available intelligence” and “serious, intellectually disciplined

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<sup>89</sup> Some were listed in the Introduction, in my discussion of the ‘classicism’ phase of cultural studies.

contemplation of the deeper issues” into everyday life (Shils 1961, 15). And Horkheimer and Adorno argued in *The Culture Industry* (1972) that, “[t]he sound film... leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience... [Sound films] are so designed that quickness, powers of observation and experience are undeniably needed to apprehend them at all; yet sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, 126). I am with Gumbrecht in contradistinction to these theorists and their many contemporaries in arguing that, while rational reflection is important, its absence – or replacement by other modes of being – does not necessarily equate to aesthetic experiences of diminished quality or value.

Gumbrecht asserts that during aesthetic experiences,

what we feel is probably not more than a specifically high level in the functioning of some of our general cognitive, emotional, and perhaps even physical faculties. The difference that these moments make seems to be based in quantity. And I like to combine the quantitative concept of ‘intensity’ with the meaning of temporal fragmentation in the word ‘moments’ because I know... that there is no reliable, no guaranteed way of producing moments of intensity, and we have even less hope of holding onto them or extending their duration (Gumbrecht 2004, 96)

I take it for granted that whether or not the reader agrees with the importance of moments of intensity in aesthetic experience, she can nonetheless imagine – more likely, recall – the specificity of such moments and the particular experience of them in the stomach, the skin, the tips of fingers and toes and so on. It is that quantitative, intense, primarily *physical* experience of superhero products I want to emphasize throughout this chapter, especially with regard to their newfound popularity among mainstream audiences – that is, those

audiences who would likely not call themselves comic collectors or superhero ‘fans’ (as discussed in chapter three).

To be clear, I am not attempting to evacuate the intellectual from aesthetic experience. On the contrary, *extended* appreciation of superheroes usually involves contemplative, intellectual engagement with any number of aspects of the genre. Aficionados can debate pros and cons, strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures of many aspects of the superhero: character development, powers, costume, origin story, successful continuity, interesting artwork, creative iterations across media... the list is nearly endless. That form of aesthetic experience vis-à-vis superheroes is well-known – phrases like ‘fan’, ‘fan boy’, and ‘comic geek’ capture that experience well, if disparagingly. Some of the matters I discussed above, such as iteration in the superhero genre, require such intellectual and long-term engagement with the genre to be fully appreciated. But whether an individual is able to engage with superheroes in that manner or not, they can nonetheless engage with superheroes in the physical, galvanic ‘intensity’ theorized by Gumbrecht.

Before moving on to elaborate what I see as the moments of aesthetic intensity evoked by the experience of some superhero products, I pause here briefly to note some theoretical links between aesthetic intensity and two sociological approaches I reviewed in chapter one. I do this for two reasons. First, this connection between multiple, unconnected perspectives jumped out at me as interesting, and I so wish to reflect on it in an autoethnographic fashion. Second, the connection points to a theoretical line that stretches across this dissertation that might not otherwise be clear.

When discussing autoethnography in relation to other sociological traditions in chapter one, two of the traditions I touched on were passionate sociology and lyrical sociology. As mentioned, passionate sociology is “a sociology concerned with the sharp and specific experiences of life; not seeking to dissolve these experiences in the pursuit of idealized abstraction, it wants to feel them, to be on the edge. An engaged or passionate sociology involves a sensual and *full-bodied approach* to knowing” (Game and Metcalfe 1996, 5, emphasis added). Lyrical sociology is an expressly non-narrative form that is concerned less with explanation than with evocative writing that tries to evoke memories and/or feelings in readers. Therefore, as Andrew Abbot puts it, “[t]he lyrical is momentary... It is not about something happening. It is not about an outcome. *It is about something that is, a state of being*” (Abbott 2007, 75, emphasis added). The former resembles Gumbrecht’s elaboration of aesthetic intensity with its emphasis on embodied knowing that does not foreground intellect, but something more physical and, according to Gumbrecht, pre-rational. The latter recollects aesthetic intensity with its attention to the momentary and the present, which is the only way something can be ‘experienced’, rather than focusing on hindsight or post-experience analysis. The theoretical triangle formed by these three points – aesthetic intensity, passionate sociology and lyrical sociology – envelops what I see as an epistemological argument, that knowing is not simply a matter of rationality or reflection, but something more as well, something based in momentary experiences. The theoretical and methodological ramifications of this epistemology are powerfully expressed through autoethnography, which eschews traditional approaches that emphasize disengaged

rationality in favor of trying to communicate experience as momentary, intense and engaged. Thus, autoethnography and aesthetic intensity, the method and central concept of this dissertation, can be seen to share consistent epistemological foundations that are also shared by two other sociological traditions.

### **Robust Super-marketing: aesthetically intense superhero commercials**

In chapter two, I argued that superheroes have proliferated into new cultural spaces and reviewed some examples of ‘shallow super-marketing’ – advertisements that mobilized superheroes, but usually in humorous, somewhat satirical fashion. In this chapter, I review two further marketing campaigns that involved superheroes, but which did so in more ‘robust’, earnest or non-ironic fashion. As a result, I argue that these campaigns both manage to mobilize some of the aesthetic intensity of the superhero, and I articulate the ways in which I found them to accomplish this.

#### **Case 1: Bryantman**

For approximately one year, until September 2007, this billboard and two more like it appeared along Bank Street in Old Ottawa South, Ottawa, Ontario.

## Image 1: Bryantman billboard by Bryant

Photo by Daniel Braun



Bryant’s website identifies the American-based company as a complete heating and cooling sale and installation service founded in 1904 (Bryant 2011). Another page of the site titled “Bryantman: the Hero in Every Bryant Dealer” explains that the figure in Image 1 above, Bryantman, “was created in 2006 to represent the hero in each of our dealers and their dedication to doing Whatever It Takes® to keep you comfortable. And today, Bryantman remains a symbol of trust, experience and dependability” (Bryant 2011).

Over the course of 2006 and 2007, live-action commercials featuring Bryantman could be seen on daytime television across Canada. Bryantman was a mild, mannered Bryant repairman who transformed into a superhero when his enemies, ‘The Scorcher’ and

'Bonechiller', struck. The commercials presented Bryantman's adventures through visuals akin to 'action' films, featuring acrobatic stunt work, dramatic camera-angles and close-ups, dramatic orchestral background music, and special-effects including monstrous enemies and Bryantman's laser-like heat and cold beams. By the end of 2007 the commercials had ceased airing and it appeared that the billboard was the last the world would know of the enigmatic Bryantman. But in January, 2008, he made a new and dramatic reappearance on Bryant's website (Bryant 2008) where, for several years, he enjoyed not just his own page but an entire section. The 'Bryantman' section of the website contained streaming video of the two commercials, original Bryantman stories told in comic-book format and 'transcriptions' of interviews in which Bryantman revealed his origin, the nature of his "superpowers" and his mission (to do "Whatever It Takes" – a copyrighted phrase – to ensure people are comfortable in their homes). When the "reporter", concerned about the coming winter, asks "do you think...(in a hushed voice) HE'LL [Bonechiller]...be back?", Bryantman is happy to confirm that he has new "gadgets" in his "arsenal" (new Bryant products) with which to combat the villain's "frigidly-fiendish ways". The website promised more interviews and stories to come, but by 2008 Bryantman's presence on the website had been reduced to the sub-page referenced above and an ever-present image on the masthead.

Both the concept and the execution of the Bryantman character and 'story' point to some of the ways in which superheroes can deploy aesthetically intense experiences. It is hard to imagine a more 'grown up' – boring, unavoidable, painfully expensive – product than a home heating or cooling system. Clearly this is not an appeal to children's consumerism,

and it is difficult to imagine that Bryant hoped parents would be swayed by children's cries of 'please, daddy, buy the furnace with the superhero on it!'. What the superhero theme afforded Bryant was the opportunity to involve their audiences and customers in a story, one in which their 'household enemies', discomfort due to temperature fluctuation, become solidified and embodied ugly, scary villains laughing (in extreme close-up) directly at viewers even as they damage property and sadden people in the commercial. The commercials act as mini-movies, complete with handsome hero with a dual identity, cute sidekick dog, transforming super-car and, perhaps most importantly, a narrative arc. All of these elements work not only to keep viewers entertained and attentive for a full 30 seconds, but to draw viewers into a spectacular world *within our grasp* in which *our* enemies can be battled and defeated. And, in an advertising maneuver pioneered by creators of the 1999 *The Blair Witch Project* and since employed for many pop-culture products, Bryant used its website to support and reinforce the commercials by fleshing out the Bryantman story, presenting all kinds of added story-elements that cannot be conveyed in a 30-second commercial – personal histories, more supporting characters, character relationships, etc. It is this attention to storytelling, character detail and visual excitement that lends the Bryantman campaign some of the aesthetic intensity of the superhero genre. My next example, however, seems to me to have been even more successful in this regard.

## Case 2: Batman's Car

Six commercials featuring Batman aired on television in 2001, each promoting a different aspect of General Motors' 'OnStar System', an integrated guidance and communication device the manufacturer was installing in its high-end automobiles. The commercials were immediately notable for their lush and accurate recreations of the motifs of recent Batman films, including Batman's costume, the Batmobile, the sweeping gothic architecture of Gotham City, the musical score and even a film actor reprising the role of Alfred, Bruce Wayne's butler and confidant, from the Batman films of the 1980s and 90s. The commercials featured visually gripping action sequences, minimal and well-delivered dialogue, faithful portrayals of various Batman characters and, most impressively, a convincing merging of OnStar's features and Batman's universe in an aesthetically intense manner.<sup>90</sup>

OnStar is automobile-based technology, and among superheroes Batman is most associated with technology, gadgets and a cool car. Along with his yellow utility belt and 'batarangs' (bat-shaped, boomerang-like offensive weapons), Batman's most well-known devices are his vehicles, especially his car, the Batmobile. The Batmobile has been redesigned repeatedly throughout Batman's 40-plus year career but has always featured impossible 'technology' along the lines of James Bond's cars: offensive weapons, defensive shields, autopilot, ejector seats, jet-propulsion, elaborate communication systems and super-

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<sup>90</sup> All six ads were edited into one YouTube clip titled "Batman OnStar Movie", viewable at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xen9Ylz5GoY>.

computers always featured prominently in Batmobiles, a label that is recognized widely enough to conjure up notions of advanced technology even among the superhero-illiterate.

By associating OnStar with those fantastic possibilities in these commercials, General Motors managed not only to showcase their OnStar technology, but to imbue it with an extra air of excitement, utility and 'cool'. In the first commercial Batman swoops down from high above 'us' onto the floor of the Batcave (his underground headquarters) as Alfred informs him of recent changes made to "step up safety in Batmobile". Batman is surprised and Alfred explains the new security features, blending real life concerns with those faced only by superheroes. Should Batman become stranded he will be locatable by satellite (GPS navigation systems were not as common in 2001 as they are today); should his airbag deploy, an operator will be notified and communicate with Batman via a speakerphone in case further assistance is needed; and, should a "villain" steal the Batmobile, it can be tracked and located. Batman appears impressed with the new technology, especially when Alfred tells him it is all accessible by pressing a single OnStar button.

In general, the commercials balance recognizable elements of established Batman lore with demonstrations of the OnStar technology: Batman is always serious and speaks in a low gravelly voice on the OnStar hands-free phone, whether calling the Police Commissioner in response to the Bat-Signal or calling his girlfriend to inform her a car-chase is making him tardy; the Riddler taunts Batman (and sets up his own capture) by emailing riddles to Batman about the crime he is in the midst of committing, which Batman receives in the car; Batman, standing on top of a tall building, calls OnStar on a wrist-phone to ask the operator

to remotely unlock the Batmobile's door, saving Batman precious seconds on his way to capture the Joker.

Each commercial is only 30 seconds long and yet each one manages in that tiny space of time to do two things with the superhero genre that are directly relevant to my argument. First, the commercials use superheroes to convey meaningful messages to adult consumers about matters they take seriously, either as a concern – the dangers of high-speed driving, auto accidents, driving in cities, urban crime and potential isolation – or as fantasy – athletic, acrobatic physicality, excitement and adventure, groundbreaking technology at one's fingertips and increased 'connectivity' with those important to us. The message of these commercials is that, with that kind of technology in our cars, we are all one step closer to the fantastic world of the superhero because, in the commercials, Batman is not acting as a 'hero to the rescue', but as a 'normal' citizen navigating problems similar to our own. Having Batman engaged in activities like those encountered by viewers has two effects: first, the exoticness of the superhero is reduced as Batman not only uses the same technology we can, but is impressed by it, needs assistance from it and even uses it to engage in such mundane activities as checking email and phoning home. Second, those everyday activities, placed in the context of the superhero's everyday life, may for some viewers temporarily gain an air of excitement, action and added importance. Not only does Batman do the things we do, he does them *seriously*, in his usual no-nonsense manner, because they *matter*, almost if not as much as anything else he does in his ongoing battle against criminals. By taking elements of

the everyday, the ordinary, and lending them a gravitas and importance that is extraordinary, these commercials engage in superdrama.

The second way these commercials are relevant to my argument is that they serve not only to promote the OnStar system, but do so in a style capable of eliciting an aesthetically intense experience in viewers. In the first instance, this is possible thanks to the cinematically sophisticated manner in which the commercials are captured by the camera. Batman often leaps up or plummets down into frame. Car chases show cars swerving, dodging each other and driving in otherwise exciting and dangerous fashion. In addition, scene settings are carefully constructed to elicit a sense of mystery and danger, with dark backgrounds – either outdoors at night or inside the Batcave – that mimic the gothic style of the Batman films directed by Tim Burton (1989, 1992). The commercials also borrow their musical accompaniment from those films, a lavish, orchestral score that would be familiar to any fan of the films. In all of these stylistic choices, these commercials do real work to elicit aesthetically intense experiences from viewers.

But it seems to me that the ads go further in aesthetic intensity, by relying on superhero tropes that would be familiar to almost any north-American adult, whether they are superhero fans or not. The commercials star Batman, a licensed superhero with whom most adults of car-buying age would have had childhood, if not later, experience (unlike Bryantman, who could elicit no such direct memories from audiences). There is, therefore, the potential for an immediate, pre-rational sympathy on the part of the viewer for this figure over whom she has felt some sense of ownership since childhood, whether or not she

has thought of it since. Batman's tropes – his cowl, billowing cape, yellow oval chest-plate, athletic ability, fancy car, utility belt, and in one case his arch-enemy, the Joker – may also be completely familiar to the average viewer. In addition, all of these elements are introduced to the viewer very quickly, as the editing pace of these commercials is very quick – cuts happen almost every few seconds, giving the viewer little time to ponder what they see before being confronted by new action. The combined effect I experienced from all of these factors, and which, as I have tried to demonstrate, could potentially be felt by any viewer, not just superhero fans, seems to me to capture the aesthetic intensity that can be deployed by superheroes given the right conditions.

### **Superhero Comics: aesthetic intensity through stillness**

Comics seem ripe for fostering *moments* of aesthetic intensity, since that is all they are composed of – moments, instances of stillness, of frozen action (images). Those frozen moments are imbued with chronological direction through the integration of a series of factors (dialogue within each panel, arrangement of panels across each page and of pages within the book) within the experience of the reader<sup>91</sup>, an aesthetic experience as ripe with potential for intensity as any other. However, unlike other entertainment media that require audiences to keep up with a prescribed pace (like music or films), the comic form has

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<sup>91</sup> For more on the structure of the comic page and its impact on and interaction with the reader's experience, see Eisner (1986) and McCloud (1993).

relatively less control over the reader's experience. Readers can stop and restart their engagement with the product at will, as well as speed up or slow down their consumption (as with most other forms of reading). As Taylor puts it, "a comic's sequentiality is metonymical, consisting of interrelated panels depicting isolated, static moments that must stand in for an entire series of actions. Bodies are always-already literally objectified by these conditions, represented as dynamic statues that are only 'activated' virtually by the imaginative eye of the reader" (Taylor 2007, 348). Comic creators, therefore, have invented devices that influence the reader's experience of the comic. Although most of these devices are visual and depend in large part on the comic-artist's skill for successful deployment, writers, inkers and letterers also often play important roles in these processes. Therefore, in what follows I focus on the devices themselves and speak generally of 'creators', rather than artists or individuals.

As a reader of comics from a young age, they *did* provide experiences of what I recognize in retrospect as aesthetic intensity. It is perhaps more commonplace to categorize feelings of intensity that are reactions to entertainment as 'emotional' (and therefore intellectual) than aesthetic (in Gumbrecht's sense, prior to intellectual interpretation). But reviewing my experience of the death of Spider-Man's girlfriend at the hand of his enemy – hazy and old though the memory is – I cannot help but see it as having had a physical, bodily effect on me. This was due, in part, to the fact that I was reading the comic with a flashlight, sitting in the dark on the floor of my room at the age of 6 or 7, long after my bedtime. It was also due in part to the comic I was reading being a reprint, a thick, hundred-page digest

collecting random assortments of Marvel stories that had already been published, and that I therefore had no idea what to expect from one story to the next.<sup>92</sup> I knew and likely already loved Spider-Man as if he were a real friend, but I had no awareness of his history, or of the ideas of comic-book continuity, or of the possibility that comic characters could die or that heroes could become enraged. So, after the Green Goblin knocked Gwen Stacy off the Brooklyn Bridge, and after Spider-Man caught her mid-plummet using his web-line and possibly fracturing her neck, and after he found Gwen to be dead; after all this when Spider-Man screamed at the Green Goblin that he had killed the woman he loved and that he, Spider-Man, would surely destroy the Goblin, I was perhaps primed to feel the experience of that sequence particularly intensely. But it was in large measure a bodily experience; I remember particularly the sensation of my fingers and feet feeling suddenly quite cold, and a particular churning in my belly, all occurring just as I read and looked at that final page of the comic, a splash-page, in which Spider-Man promised vengeance.

The sequence illustrated on the page was primarily emotional, hinging as it did on the extreme upset of the principal character, but the effect on me was, at least immediately, pre-emotional. But I want to emphasize that it was precisely the emotional tenor of the sequence, emphasized by Spider-Man's stationary pose, that elicited the intense experience in me. Though this was not a sequence attempting to illustrate or imply intense physical

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<sup>92</sup> The two-part story "The Night Gwen Stacy Died" was originally presented in *Amazing Spider-Man* issues 121-22 (Conway and Kane 1973).

activity (such as acrobatic leaping), it nonetheless could evoke a physical sensation from its audience. This is one example culled from thousands, meant to illustrate the usefulness of Gumbrecht's concept of aesthetic intensity for conceptualizing, and possibly understanding, how the superhero may be experienced.

But, because comics are an inherently still medium, there are other ways in which comics have constrained the potential aesthetic intensity of superheroes. Comic-book pages are typically (though not always) composed of *panels*, boxes or otherwise delimited spaces on the page within which a specific action or set of actions occurs. The traditional format for comic books is generally considered to be the 9-panel page, in which each letter-size page presents the reader with three rows of three panels each, the panels being rectangular and standing tall rather than wide (see Image 2, following page). The time passing within one panel varies, depending on its content. Some panels may be filled with dialogue balloons while others illustrate one quick movement. In general, though, on the 9-panel page, each panel usually represents between one and 10 seconds of time passing within the story. Within this traditional format, the panels are separated by *gutters*, or white space on which nothing has been printed. As McCloud (among others) points out, while the gutters are usually ignored by readers as empty space, they are essential for providing meaning to the comics page since they *imply* to the reader the passage of time between the moments frozen in each panel. Therefore, capable comic-creators must always be aware not only of the effects of the actions they present, but those they do not present – those assumed to occur 'between' the panels – as well as the connections and fluidity of meaning across the panels

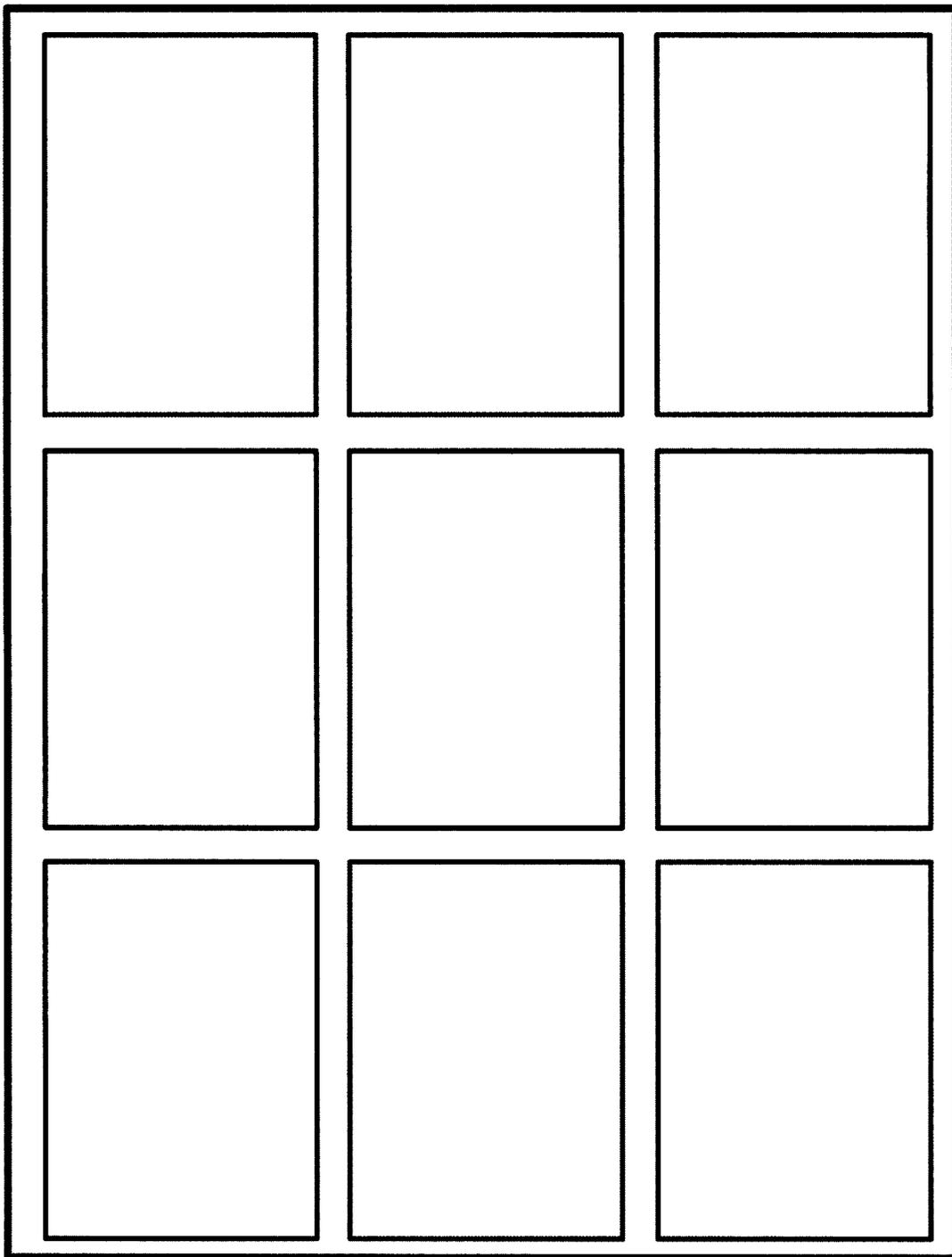
and gutters. As with scene-by-scene editing of films, or logical progression of ideas and arguments in written documents, comics have an internal grammar which must be adhered to if meaning is to be conveyed from the creator to the consumer.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> As with any medium, skilled creators can manipulate that grammar creatively to come up with new or otherwise interesting forms. It is worth noting that, among comic creators, superhero comics creators are rarely the ones innovating entirely new grammatical structures for comics. Like most creators of entertainment, superhero comic creators are concerned primarily (I argue) with telling enthralling stories, and thus will tend to forego presentations that are more likely to confuse readers than entertain them.

**Image 2: Sample traditional comic page (9 panels in 3x3 grid)**

*Note: not to scale*



The preeminent device employed by comic-creators to slow the passage of time is the increase of panels in a sequence. For example, using 9 panels to portray a moment would add more detail to that moment that would otherwise use only 1 or 2 panels, thus making the moment feel longer to the reader. On the other hand, the main device used in order to *stretch* time – doing what Gumbrecht referred to above as increasing duration – is the splash-page, when one full page or, better yet, two facing pages are devoted to one image (or 1 panel with no borders). The relative largeness of that image, coupled with its spreading across the page and a limited amount of dialogue (usually only one short exclamation by one character to another), contributes to an interpretation of this moment as central to the story and thus worthy of ‘stretching’. This is the same function given to moving-image products through the use of ‘slow-motion’ or other, similar effects. However, whereas in other media the creators control the length of interaction between the moment and the subject, comic-creators have no such control. A comic-reader may or may not be impressed by the splash-page, and those who are not will not pause over it, soak it in or experience it as any different from every other page – thus the moment does not become intensified for that reader. This power, retained by the comic-reader and surrendered by the moving-image watcher,<sup>94</sup> presents a double-edged sword when considering aesthetic experiences. On one hand it allows for subjects the possibility of creating their own intense moments, reading more

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<sup>94</sup> The exception is the subject watching video on a personal recording device, as she may pause, rewind and even fast-forward at will, just like a reader.

slowly or quickly as they see fit. On the other hand, this control reduces opportunities for being 'carried away' by the product. Certainly, books and comics can be enthralling. Nevertheless, comic-reading in particular practically elicits 'repeat reading' on the part of the subject who will, almost without thought, review or re-scan, parts of the page (or two facing pages) he has read once. Such review serves to cement story-developments (both narrative and visual) more firmly in memory even as it necessarily undercuts feelings of intensity, for intensity felt physically is most often the result of newness, unfamiliarity and, most of all, loss – or at least absence – of intellectual control.<sup>95</sup> Therefore, with respect to moments of intense aesthetic experience, superheroes are to some degree always limited by their 'home' medium, the comic book.

I came to fully understand this fact through a kind of aesthetic experience of my own one night in downtown Montreal, circa 1992. I was walking with a friend whose love of Spider-Man equaled or surpassed my own, and, typically (embarrassingly), we were more interested in minutiae of superhero-lore than in the vibrant night-life around us. Somehow the question of 'how do you imagine Spidey being real' came up, and my friend answered something like "I picture him jumping off that building, shooting a web to that street-light, swinging down in a big arc, then letting go on the way back up, flipping through the air and

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<sup>95</sup> This includes the athletic events focused on by Gumbrecht. Professional and amateur athletes alike will revel in the feeling of the body 'knowing what to do' or 'reacting too quickly for thought' in the 'beautiful plays' discussed by Gumbrecht.

landing on that building across the street... *all so fast you couldn't really see him.*" The emphasis is mine, not his, because it was that part of the statement that stunned me. By *looking up* at the specific building he pointed to in his description *and imagining* Spider-Man's actions, I experienced a visceral moment of aesthetic intensity, one of seeing Spider-Man engaged in these blurringly quick actions. My friend had absorbed an element of the Spider-Man narrative I had not – his incredible speed – and was able to reflect upon it. But new as it was for me, the idea provoked in me not reflection but bodily aesthetic sensation. While I imagined Spider-Man as a very athletic figure – flipping, swinging, leaping, balancing – my mental movies had never included extreme, blurring speed which comics could describe (through narration) or imply, but could not show. Some comic artists then, as they do now, implied the character's movement by drawing faded, somewhat smudged 'past' Spider-Men; the figure engaged in a series of movements leading up to one full-color foregrounded image of Spider-Man 'now', in the final pose of this series of movements. But even this was a series of still images, captioned with commentary about the superlative speed of the movements. I had always been *aware* that the character moved so quickly, but had never integrated that fact with my own mental stock-footage of him. This relative lack of speed was reinforced by the only moving-image Spider-Man products I had experienced by that point in time – the 1960s and 1980s cartoons, and Spider-Man's appearances on the children's program *The Electric Company*. Though the programs attempted to reproduce the exciting, action-based elements of the comic, they were not sophisticated enough to show a fast-moving Spider-Man (indeed in most cases the drawing and animation styles left him less

than graceful or even acrobatic, verging instead on clumsy). Spider-Man products, to that point in time, had not managed to provide for me moments of aesthetic intensity based on one of Spider-Man's most essential characteristics: his bodily movements. I had to wait for my friend's description to elicit that shocking and entirely enjoyable realization. However, the ability of the products to elicit such responses did increase by the time of the first live-action Spider-Man film and its sequels, to which I return below.<sup>96</sup>

Some, perhaps many people have had and may even remember such comic-based experiences as children; few, unlike myself and other comic fans, continued to seek and enjoy them as adults. Thus the kinds of aesthetically intense experiences I have discussed so far are likely relatively niche experiences, confined to comic fans, rather than commonplace experiences shared by non-comic fans as well. The rest of this chapter explores superhero experiences removed from the comic medium in order to begin pointing out some of the qualities of superheroes that, I believe, allow them the potential to provide aesthetically intense experiences to *all* audiences.

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<sup>96</sup> It is worth mentioning the short-lived live-action *Spider-Man* television program here. It never had much success and was cancelled after 13 episodes. It suffered from a number of standard television problems such as flat, dull characters, overly-complex plots and, perhaps foremost, terrible special effects. On the whole, however, I believe it failed because it was unable to mobilize any sense of aesthetic intensity among its viewers, through particularly superheroic tropes like acrobatics or fantastic scenarios, or through the devices of standard television dramas.

## **Beyond Comics: superhero aesthetic intensity through movement**

In February 2008, Dwight Howard, Centre/Power Forward for the Orlando Magic, won the National Basketball Association's Slam-Dunk contest. The contest, long part of the NBA's build-up to its yearly All-Star game, had in recent years been criticized as boring by fans and some commentators. Viewers grew tired of what they saw to be repetitive and uninspired dunks, performed principally by (relatively) less-talented players, as 'star' players opted not to risk injury in an event with no official status within regulation play. Howard's performance through the 4-round contest aimed to change that perception, as he engaged in a series of dunks challenging and complex enough to earn him one of the few perfect scores ever awarded in the dunk contest. But it was one of his least well-performed dunks – nicknamed the 'Superman dunk' by announcers – that earned him not only a perfect score, but huge applause from fans, fellow-players, judges and commentators. Technically not even a slam dunk (Howard did not bring the ball to the hoop, but had to throw it in from some inches away, albeit from above the plane of the hoop,), Howard also began his leap to the hoop a few steps past the foul-line, while most winning dunks involve jumps taken at or before the foul-line (and thus further from the hoop). It seems likely, then, that the dunk's high score was due in part to Howard's sense of theatrics and his invocation of the superhero to excite his audience.

Competitors in the dunk contest have as much time as they need to set up their dunk, allowing them to prepare props or partners as necessary. Before his dunk, Howard handed a teammate a small red bundle, which he flapped open into a red cape with yellow Superman-

shield on the back. Fans and other players and coaches on the sidelines immediately began applauding and cheering. But when Howard removed his Orlando Magic jersey, flashing a blue t-shirt with a small but exact replica of the red-and-yellow shield as it appears on Superman's chest, the entire stadium – fans, players and judges – rose to its feet and made an incredible amount of noise. Howard stooped to let his partner tie the cape around his neck and, walking to an opposing corner, bent half and stretched his arms out in front of him for a moment. Television viewers heard announcers exclaim “Superman is in the house!” and “he looks like Superman, he’s got a body like Superman!” Once at his starting-position, Howard carefully adjusted the cape to drape over his shoulders and back before driving towards the hoop. Running empty handed he leapt into the air to catch a pass from his partner and, cape streaming behind him, threw the ball downwards through the hoop. His leap, while short compared to other dunks during the competition, was nonetheless long and high enough for him to appear momentarily untethered from gravity. His gaze, focused hard on the hoop (made more evident in slow-motion alternate-angle replays), emphasized the power imbued in his flight. When Howard completed his (non-) dunk, the five judges immediately held up ‘10’ cards, the television announcers screamed “Suuuuupermaaaan!” and “that is REALLY flying!” into their microphones and, moments later, the stadium soundperson played a small clip of the theme music from John Williams’ *Superman* score.

Even standing still before the dunk, Howard struck an impressive, almost superheroic figure. Howard’s ‘costume’ was an impoverished one, consisting of child-size cape and blue muscle-shirt with a small iron-on logo. But the shirt matched his blue Orlando Magic shorts

and both were visually offset and enhanced by the bright red of the cape and his very bright white sneakers with red highlights. The overall effect, given his size and build, was of a dynamic and sporty uniform that, while probably silly-looking on an average man standing still, emphasized Howard's ability and facility with movement and his own body. This *was* Superman in a way that no Hollywood actor in a movie ever could be, because Howard wore the costume in order to emphasize his own physicality, power and grace, not to disappear into a role, to become someone else. This Superman was fun and exciting because he appeared *truly* unexpectedly, and while present was doing, achieving, showing (without exactly *showing off*, at least not principally) – and then vanishing just as suddenly (Howard was savvy enough to quickly remove the cape and put his Orlando Magic jersey back on once the dunk and its attendant cheering and fervor ended). Superman appeared, impressed and disappeared, achieving a particular effect which, I argue, would not have been possible without both that particular figure. The athlete is an exciting and impressive figure himself, both still and in flight, but the costume was necessary to add something more to the moment. Exactly what that 'something' was is difficult to rationalize, but was expressed quite powerfully by the smiles, cheering and exuberance of those present to witness the figure's appearance.

Howard's slam dunk fused the superhero aesthetic with a *real*, fast and focused explosion of athletic force, bringing to life another key aspect of the superhero, one enjoyed by children and forgotten or ignored by most adults: the joy and excitement of physicality and movement, both anticipated and engaged in. Though superheroes are usually criticized

as violent, that is only one result of a more fundamental characteristic, their physicality. Superheroes *move* – not just by punching and kicking, but by travelling quickly between locations and getting to the scene of the crime just in time, and doing so in ways beyond those without superpowers. Even when still, as when Batman crouches on a rooftop or the Hulk simply stands still, superheroes' tensed muscles and dramatic poses always prefigure movement, at the very least. Of all the well-known comic-book superheroes none deploy this form of physicality more or better than Spider-Man, who is, above all, a leaper who escapes gravity for moments, only always to be recaptured and to escape again. While the fictional Superman knows no such limitations, flying rather than leaping since the 1940s, Dwight Howard's Superman dunk succeeded in making real a kind of superheroic moment: a physically impressive person in bright, colourful clothing, seeming to defy gravity in a way most of us cannot – if only momentarily. But Howard's dunk, as with Spider-Man's leaps, are particularly intense to experience precisely *because* they are momentary. Moments of intensity are by definition brief and require clearly delimited beginnings and ends that differentiate them from the subject's contextualizing experiences. This is not only the case for a human basketball player imitating a superhero; the leap is a central aspect of the appeal of certain superheroes.

### **The Aesthetic Experience of Superheroes: leaps and bounds**

Like splash pages, leaps can be mesmerizing moments of intensity and extended duration. The most exciting leaps to witness are those that include, either really or through strange

effect, a moment's pause, an apogee at which the leaper seems static and balanced within what is actually a completely unbalanced and frenetic moment. Basketball fans, particularly those who watch the yearly professional Slam Dunk contest, know this excitement of watching a human 'get off the ground' in a manner that seems to allow him mastery of third-dimension movement. The leap's apogee crystallizes the excitement of the moment; however, the apogee is the result of the ascent that starts from the ground and would not be as exciting without the moment of liftoff, the collection, storage and explosive release of energy in and from the human form (or without the descent). Certainly, seeing a person levitate or fly in reality would be exciting. But images of flight, as I discuss below, are static and present continuous equilibrium, not the excitement of brief, barely-possible equilibrium.

This is therefore an area in which moving superhero products may surpass comics: comics can illustrate flight, and they can illustrate discrete points of a leap. But they cannot directly convey everything impressive and exciting about a leap, because a leap cannot be decomposed into points while retaining its essence of movement. In his discussion of Henri Bergson's work, Brian Massumi (2002) points out that trying accurately to map an arrow in flight by noting every position it moves through is impossible, because there are an infinite number of points and an infinity of distance between each point. This leads to his assertion that

a path is not composed of positions. It is nondecomposable: a dynamic unity. That *continuity* of movement is of an order of reality other than the measurable, divisible space it can be confirmed as having crossed... Bergson's idea is that space itself is a retrospective construct... When we think of space as 'extensive', as being measurable,

divisible... we are stopping the world in thought... looking at only one dimension of reality (Massumi 2002)

A technique commonly used by superhero artists to convey fast movement along a path is to draw the figure at different points along that path, either connecting them with a 'blurring' effect or coloring the 'early' steps more faintly than the final step to convey the passage of time. Such panels are exactly the kind of map Massumi is discussing; discrete points are used to imply a path, but they do not capture the path, the movement. Likewise, a drawing of someone about to leap, or in the air after leaping, or landing from a leap does not fully capture the leap – it only implies it. Moving images are necessary if one is fully to appreciate, and perhaps to draw an aesthetically intense experience from a movement like a leap. The NBA slam-dunk contests achieve this and are, of course, real. But successful superhero products, illusion though they may be, can foster equally or more intense aesthetic experiences. Each of the recent Spider-Man films attained greater mainstream popularity than the single contemporary Superman film, and it seems to me this is due in part to the greater potential for aesthetic intensity offered by Spider-Man's leaping than by Superman's flights.

If one suspends disbelief about the very fact of flight and about the speed at which Superman can fly, what stands out about this mode of travel is that just by getting off the ground and above the built environment, Superman is able to navigate physical space without having to negotiate any natural or man-made obstacles. When Superman flies anywhere he may as well be teleporting to his final destination, as he need not circumvent

large buildings, mountains, or bodies of water, and he has no need for predetermined paths like roads or sidewalks. In flight, Superman doesn't have to interact with his surroundings at all. Whenever Superman is shown navigating space in this manner, his body is prone, and quite still (even his hair, which one must admit really is quite super when moving faster than sound). Stillness is in fact a defining characteristic of Superman's physicality. Even when shown lifting something heavy, he is more likely to be shown straining, like a power lifter, than moving that object in a quick or violent manner. The key word, of course, is power – Superman's figure is most often manipulated into positions that are meant to convey power in the form of strength, both as physical puissance and psychological determination. Visually, however, this results in little movement on the part of the character, who remains suspended high above all earthly concerns.

Spider-Man, who does not fly, lives and operates mainly within a large city just like Superman. However, when he is in a hurry and has to travel across Manhattan, Spider-Man cannot simply pass over the city. Like the rest of us who cannot fly, he is forced to deal with the physical reality of the city in some way. Like us, if he is in a hurry he will have to run. Having superpowers, he not only runs faster than us, but can run up the sides of buildings, leap across the space between buildings, and of course, swing through the air on his artificial web-lines. This presents a very different kind of superheroic figure from Superman's. Instead of a still body in detached flight, we have a figure anchored to infrastructure, in constant rapid motion, traveling faster and with more agility than is humanly possible but still having to deal with most of the same basic infrastructural restrictions as we do every

day. The figure presented by Superman's movement is one that nears tranquility in its lack of motion; contrast this with Spider-Man's movement, which is frenetic, leaping and generally reminiscent of a person who has had too much coffee, if greatly amplified. When Superman soars we see the impossible. But when Spider-Man jumps, runs, and bounces off walls, we see our own abilities – amplified certainly, but still our own human possibilities. That connection grants Spider-Man an ability that Superman lacks, that of eliciting moments of sympathetic aesthetic intensity from his audience through a central superheroic characteristic, physical action.

Above, I mentioned the shortcomings of many Spider-Man products in relation to that very characteristic; few of them manage directly and clearly to convey Spider-Man's particular superheroic style of movement. The three Spider-Man films of the 2000s, however, excelled in this regard. Combining traditional movie special-effects (stunt-people suspended by wires, etc.) with computer-generated graphics, the films managed to create scenes in which the camera 'followed'<sup>97</sup> Spider-Man in his exertions swinging across the city. Alongside or behind the character, we too jump off rooftops and plummet to the ground, only to swing out on a webline at the last possible moment and arc back into the sky. These kinds of sequences, difficult to describe but immediately apparent when watching the

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<sup>97</sup> While the illusion is one of following behind or alongside Spider-Man, there is no real following since there is no actual camera movement, but rather a production process more similar to animation.

films, draw the viewer in and elicit a particular kind of aesthetic experience that parallels Gumbrecht's concept of *Gelassenheit*.

Gumbrecht argues for "aesthetic experience... as an extreme degree of serenity, composure... *Gelassenheit*... *being in sync with the things of the world*" (Gumbrecht 2004, 117). Serenity may not seem relevant to my discussion of Spider-Man's physical activity or the kind of intense responses that I am asserting can be elicited in viewers – responses such as increased heart-rate, a sense of plummeting in the stomach, or goose bumps) who are enjoying and being carried along by Spider-Man's exertions. Serenity, if viewed as a total mind/body laxness, is not part of the experience I am describing. But Gumbrecht is keen to disentangle interpretation and meaning from aesthetic experiences, and in the latter serenity corresponds to openness to experience, rather than stillness. *Gelassenheit* refers to a situation that is very specific to our contemporary culture, that is, to the impression of "[e]xperiencing the things of the world in their preconceptual thingness," an experience that may "reactivate a feeling for the bodily and the spatial dimension of our existence... to epiphanies that, for moments at least, make us dream, make us long for, and make us perhaps even remember, with our bodies as well as with our minds, how good it would be to live in sync with the things of the world" (Gumbrecht 2004, 117-18). This epiphany felt in the body and the open mind while following alongside (watching) Spider-Man as he runs across vertical surfaces, leaps through the air twenty stories up and so on, is the experiencing of aesthetic intensity via the contemporary figure of the superhero. When Spider-Man uses the built environment without wasted effort or thought, but rather through seamless, spectacular physical

engagement, he carries us along with him and, if we allow it, we experience moments of aesthetic – neither purely physical nor mental nor active, but a unique combination of the three – intensity.

Leaps have been central to the superhero genre almost since its inception, and feature prominently in most contemporary moving superhero products. In the *Daredevil* film and comics, the title-character is almost as acrobatic as Spider-Man and spends much of his time running and jumping across the rooftops of Hell's Kitchen in New York. The Hulk, who leaps about one mile at a time, was given huge expanses of desert to leap across in his first film; indeed, one of the few times we see the monster seem at all happy is in mid-air, as the wind blows into his face at the apogee of his vault. The *X-Men* films, the various Batman films, and even the much-bemoaned *Catwoman* – in short, those films of the 2000s featuring non-flying superheroes – all include at least some moments of leaping. They are almost always graphically enhanced using special-effects of some kind to increase not just the magnitude of the leap but, most importantly, to increase the duration of the moment of apogee. It is, in part, through such leaps and the extended moments of aesthetic intensity they engender that superheroes have managed to increase their hold on the popular imagination and attain newfound levels of popularity. This is not tantamount to claiming that 'better special effects' are to thank for the greater success of recent live-action superhero films, when compared to most of their pre-2000s predecessors. Rather, it is the combination of new techniques and possibilities in visual story-telling *with* an understanding on the part of creators that this element of superheroes, this capacity of theirs to do things *just beyond*

normal human ability – perhaps just beyond NBA slam-dunk specialists – that must be highlighted in order to make clear their fundamental appeal.

## **Aesthetically Intense Superdrama**

In the previous chapter I argued that in order for the superhero genre to embrace modern melodrama, the secret-identity had to become fractured to allow for the extraordinary aspects of the superhero's life to become imbricated with its everyday aspects. In other words, the ordinary, non-super part of the superhero's existence had to gain more prominence in superhero stories for them to become more melodramatic. I provided examples of this occurring in comics, movies and television programs. Above, I have argued that it is the 'super-ness' of the superhero that grants the figure and the genre the ability to incite aesthetically intense experiences from audiences, as illustrated in the effect of superhuman leaps. I again provided examples of these, with reference to comics and to moving media.

To conclude my argument, I want to assert that many of the examples cited in these final two chapters mobilize both modern melodrama and aesthetic intensity, which, to me, grants them an effect unique to the superhero genre, that of superdrama.

Superdrama occurs when a product successfully mobilizes both modern melodrama and aesthetic intensity. As I have demonstrated, each of these can be mobilized through

comics, television programs and films, and thus so can superdrama be mobilized through any of those media.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, I have experienced superdrama while consuming instances of each of these: the recent issue of *Action Comics* discussed in chapter five; certain episodes of *Smallville*; and, perhaps most strongly, while watching the superhero movies *Spider-Man 2* (2004) and *The Avengers* (2012). I have already laid out the characteristics of these products that, I believe, went into creating the effect of superdrama in my experience of them.

Though the methodological and theoretical orientation of this dissertation only allows me to speak of my own experiences, I do not believe I am alone in having enjoyed the experience of superdrama. Rather, after having noticed such experiences, I have attempted to bring my sociological training to bear on them in order to theorize the factors within superhero products that contributed to my experiences of superdrama. My experiences of superdrama, in conjunction with the recent proliferation of superheroes into new cultural spheres, had led me to believe that superdrama is an experience enjoyed by many consumers of popular culture. Indeed, it is one of the few explanations I find convincing to explain why, after over sixty years of existence, superheroes have, since 2000, become so much more widely a part of mainstream culture.

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<sup>98</sup> I believe it can be mobilized through other media as well, such as novels and video games, though I have not investigated these forms here.

## **Conclusion: Creating Aesthetic Intensity**

I have outlined the concept 'aesthetic intensity' as elucidated by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and stretched it somewhat in order to demonstrate how it is mobilized visually by some superhero products. Leaps and the moments of extended aesthetic intensity they can elicit are particularly important to my analysis because I believe they can be enjoyed immediately, without reflection, by anyone, regardless of their familiarity with or emotional investment in the superhero genre. The accessibility of such moments appear to me as a central factor in explaining the recent proliferation of superheroes into new cultural spaces: anyone can thrill to the moment of extended aesthetic intensity of a leap, whether or not they care about Spider-Man, or feel seduced by new, sleek technology in one's car, whether or not one relates that feeling to Batman.

# Conclusion

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I began with the research problem, why did I, a self-identified superhero fan, perceive an increase in mainstream popularity of superheroes since around 2000, when in fact superheroes have seen declining, very low, sales in their home medium, the comic book. In chapter one I reviewed the qualitative tradition of autoethnography in order to explore its development, key methodological guidelines and underlying theoretical principles, connections to sociology and critiques. I then laid out the ways in which I would employ autoethnographic methods to make my case that superheroes can deploy aesthetic intensity, and that this ability has increased in recent years thanks to changes in the ways in which their stories are told – their seriality – and the generic content of those stories – their melodramatic content.

Chapter two examined historical trends in comic-book sales, in order to demonstrate the contradictions between that material reality and my subjective impression of increased superhero popularity. I then engaged in some autoethnographic reflexivity by reflecting that my impression of increased popularity was actually an observation of superheroes proliferating into new cultural spaces. I provided a series of examples to support that reflection, demonstrating that superheroes have been put to new kinds of work in recent years, with an emphasis on their appearances in non-superhero television programs and in advertisements aimed at adults.

Chapter three began the 'second phase' of my argument, in which I began charting changes to the superhero genre that had increased their potential for aesthetic intensity, the attribute I believe facilitated their proliferation into new cultural spaces. I argued that the relationship of superhero comics with their own internal history changed, as demonstrated in my discussion of the historical periods of superhero comics called the oneiric climate, continuity and iteration. I also argued there that these changes involved the increasingly serialized nature of superhero stories which, especially after the late 1970s, were thereby lengthened enough to pay added attention to points not essential to plot, such as ongoing character development and interaction. That was an essential step for the genre to begin its turn toward the melodramatic register.

Those changes allowed superheroes and their stories first to embrace modern melodrama, a particular kind of melodrama already popular in other genres and media. In chapter four I articulated my understanding of melodrama, in light of which I analyzed one of the earliest superhero comics, *Action Comics* #5, in order to demonstrate its limited engagement with the melodramatic form, especially in relation to 2010's *Action Comics* #869, which I analyzed in chapter five. That and my review of contemporary non-comic superhero products illustrated the increased melodramatic tone of superhero stories in the 1990s and 2000s, as they fully embraced what I called modern melodrama.

I went on to argue that the mixture of modern melodrama with certain superhero tropes and, most importantly, the superhero's particular ability to elicit moments of aesthetic intensity from audiences, was the key to their newfound appeal, in that this 'superdrama'

provides both intellectual and physical stimulation in ways found enjoyable by present-day consumers of popular culture. Chapter six concluded my discussion by focusing on the aesthetic experience of superheroes – that is, how superheroes are experienced by audiences. My argument was that, alongside the characteristics of modern melodrama that superhero products began adopting in the 1970s, those products also possess the added, more unusual quality of eliciting moments of aesthetic intensity among audiences. Relying on and extending the concepts of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, I argued that, when ‘properly’ executed (as in some comics and films, but as also exemplified by Dwight Howard in the 2008 NBA Slam Dunk Contest, and by two marketing campaigns that featured superheroes), the fantastic powers of the superhero can elicit in consumers a pre-rational sensation that is pleasant.

I conclude by reasserting my belief that the capability of the figure of the superhero to elicit aesthetically intense experiences has increased in recent years thanks to changes in seriality and melodramatic content, and that all of these factors have been significant in promoting the recent proliferation of superheroes into new cultural spaces of which I became aware some years ago.

This work has made five major scholarly contributions. First, I have supported the novel theoretical point that aesthetic intensity is a characteristic that can be attributed to the superhero genre. Second, I have applied the autoethnographic method to the study of the superhero genre, thereby also suggesting an entirely new, sociological methodology for comics studies. Third, I contributed to the expansion of sociology by bringing the study of

superheroes to sociology via autoethnography. Fourth, I have stretched the concept aesthetic intensity as developed by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, by taking it up through the lens of superheroes. And fifth, in analyzing the history of superheroes with a focus on their seriality and the development of what I call 'superdrama', this dissertation presented a novel interpretation of the history and ways of experiencing that genre.

When telling a friend who is not an academic about this dissertation, his immediate response was agreement that superheroes were 'everywhere' these days, and that this was just one symptom of the current popularity of 'nerd culture'. I find myself in agreement with him and find that further investigation of this phenomenon would be both interesting and timely. It is difficult to express the phrase 'popularity of nerd culture' in more precise, scholarly terms, as it relies so much on tacit, cultural knowledge for its meaning. This dissertation raised some of the difficulties with the term 'popular'; the phrase 'nerd culture' is equally loaded, carrying with it a vague outline of particular interests (comics? Computers? Star Trek? Chess?) as well as derogatory judgment of social skills and physical appearance (and because, for a Gen X-er like myself, the terms 'popular' and 'nerd' are inherently contradictory). But, in the same manner that I am aware of increased, widespread knowledge of superheroes in mainstream culture, I am also aware of a similar spread of knowledge of, and perhaps affection for, other traits that have generally been considered 'nerdy' and, therefore, traditionally *unpopular*, such as collecting action figures, attending comic or science-fiction conventions, playing video games, and so on. Contextualizing this dissertation with a broader look at 'nerd culture' is the next step I would choose to take.

My autoethnographic engagement notwithstanding, it would be quite interesting to try to investigate audience experiences in search of 'evidence' of aesthetic experiences when engaging with superheroes. It would also be interesting to try to ascertain differences between 'fan' and 'casual viewer' experiences in terms of aesthetic intensity, if useful language and metrics for investigating and documenting them could be devised. Another formulation of that question is, in what cases is aesthetic intensity sought out by consumers of popular culture? As it could be considered both diachronically, to investigate whether or not desire for physically thrilling entertainment is a recent phenomenon, and synchronically, to clarify and perhaps identify which kinds of consumers of popular culture seek out aesthetic intensity currently, that would be a particularly robust set of investigations. In short, further interrogation of audience interaction with popular entertainment – including, though not limited to, superhero comics, television and film products, as well as non-superhero products – would be illuminating.

The question could be taken in a completely different direction by further historicizing and broadening my examination of melodrama and genre in general. This could mean, for example, pursuing archived accounts of the consumption of melodrama, to look at how that genre has been consumed in the past. A cross-cultural analysis of the construction and reception of melodrama would also be useful, since this work makes no attempt to investigate that or any other aspect of the question beyond North American borders. But almost any further examination of melodrama with respect to the question of

entertainment would be useful since, as mentioned above, it seems to have infiltrated almost every other entertainment genre in popular culture over the last 30 or 40 years.

## **Some Final Autoethnography**

In the Chapter one I stated that one way I used the autoethnographic method was in conceiving of this dissertation not as an attempt at an 'airtight case' for the objective truth of my understandings of superheroes and aesthetic intensity, but rather as an attempt to engage 'friendly readers' in a dialogue. Though that is true, I have come to realize that it is only partly true. In fact, I wrote this dissertation with a very specific audience in mind, that of my dissertation committee, and this had important ramifications on my writing that I have only realized at the end of the process.

Large chunks of chapters three, four and five were written specifically for an audience with little or no familiarity with superhero comics, stories or products in general. This is because, with one exception, my dissertation committee was never populated by individuals possessing such familiarity, either through scholarly or personal engagement with the superhero genre. As a result, I found myself delving deeply into careful, detailed accounts of, in particular, the history of retcons and reboots as played out through superhero comics. Though some discussion of these matters – and other aspects of chapters three, four and five – was necessary to develop a logical progression in my arguments, it is likely that, had I been writing with a different audience in mind, such as comics scholars or superhero fans, less such detail would have made it onto the page, perhaps to be replaced by attention to other

matters. That is not to say that the major steps in my argument would be any different; only that the careful, detailed description of some of that material might not appear.

That said, that careful description benefits this dissertation by opening up a dense, historically-complex set of processes to understanding by those new to the topic. In the first instance this refers to my dissertation committee, who have commented that the dissertation is quite readable and, in some cases, evocative. In the second instance, it may mean that this work could be used to communicate ideas about superheroes, aesthetic intensity and autoethnography to a lay audience, rather than being restricted to a scholarly one. Were that to be the case I would be nothing less than delighted, as producing texts that appeal only to the scholarly attitude has never been appealing to me. My scholarly goal for this text is the same as in my teaching: I am very interested in reaching students by making difficult ideas accessible, and perhaps this text operates around that level.

### **A last note on superheroes**

The second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen similar and interesting changes happen in superhero comics. In 2011 and 2012 Marvel retconned Spider-Man and DC rebooted their entire line of superhero comics, and in both cases some central changes have been the elimination of important personal relationships and the re-establishment of secret identities. Foremost among these are Spider-Man and Superman, both married before these changes, who are now single again. Lois Lane no longer knows Clark Kent's dual identity, and their relationship seems to have been returned to Clark harboring secret affections for Lois, who

has other interests. In addition, the new continuity once again has Kent's parents both deceased by the time he reaches adulthood, and as a result of both of these changes the Kent/Superman character no longer has anyone in whom he can confide personal woes. Spider-Man's case is somewhat different since, though not his wife, Mary-Jane Watson retains her knowledge of his secret identity, allowing Peter Parker the occasional heartfelt discussion with the woman who remains a confidant and close friend.

These changes may indicate an interest on the part of comic creators to recede from the mode of modern melodrama that has become the norm over the last two decades. However, it is also possible that creators wanted the opportunity to present those relationships as growing in the present, rather than fully established, and so may use the current 'clean slate' to rebuild those (and other) personal relationships between superheroes and their supporting characters. Time will tell, but if superhero products in other media are any indication, melodramatic superheroes continue to be very popular with mainstream audiences: at the time of this writing, the 2012 film *The Avengers* had become the third-highest grossing movie of all time. It was also, according to most superhero fans – including this one – one of if not the best superhero film so far. Appropriately, the two scenes raised most often in my discussions with fans and non-fans about it were, first, one in the middle of the film in which the six principal superhero characters stand in a room and argue with one another and, second, the gigantic battle against aliens invading New York. *The Avengers*, more than any superhero film before it, has enticed audiences with its blending of the ordinary and the extraordinary.

# Appendix

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## Comic Sales – some background

The principal difficulty with measurements of comic sales, either by volume or in dollars, lies with the general practice of the literary/ publishing industry of keeping precise figures private. Lacking regular access to publishers' data, comic researchers have turned to other sources to build their own estimates. I rely on a number of such primary and secondary resources throughout chapter one, and I discuss them here.

Comic sales between 1939 and 1960 are most difficult to assess because of a general lack of interest during that period in the details of the growth of what was still a nascent medium. As is made clear by Graph 1 in chapter 1, that period contains the greatest and quickest rise in comic sales in their history, thanks to the opening and rapid failure of dozens or perhaps hundreds of fly-by-night publishers that disappeared once some small profit was achieved, and whose sales are mostly unknown. Those publishers able to stay in business beyond the early sales-boom such as DC, Timely (later Marvel), Fawcett and Dell began collecting sales data by having their salesmen (no women at the time) ask pharmacists, newsstand dealers and other retailers which comics sold well and which did not (Wright 2001, 85). Following standard practice, publishers did not publicize those data and sales figures for this period come mostly from those sporadic news and financial publications

which happened occasionally to report on the new (and, sometimes, seemingly dangerous) phenomenon of comics. Comics-scholarship has yet to determine the sources used for these news reports, though it seems likely they were based on such partial information as informal self-reporting by some publishers and interviews with retailers.

Perhaps the only formal, systematic and non-industry based attempt to collect comics publication and sales data was undertaken for the 1955 “Interim Report on Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency,” prepared by the Subcommittee To Investigate Juvenile Delinquency in the United States, formed by the U.S. Congress and headed by Senator Estes Kefauver. The drive behind the Report was a growing ‘moral panic’ about comics and their supposed harmful effects on young readers. The report has as its stated task “a thorough, objective investigation to determine whether, as has been alleged, certain types of mass communication media are to be reckoned with as contributing to the country's alarming rise in juvenile delinquency. These include: ‘crime and horror’ comic books and other types of printed matter; the radio, television, and motion pictures” (United States Congress 1955, Introduction, I). The Report includes circulation data, but stipulates that “[n]o accurate figures are available. Many of the newer publishers of comic books do not report to the Audit Bureau of Circulations nor to the Controlled Circulation Audits, the twin firms that compile circulation figures. The subcommittee... took the most conservative estimate” (United States Congress 1955, Note 3, Section II). On the whole, comic-sales figures are spotty at best for this embryonic period of superhero comics, although it is recognized as the period in which comics achieved a market-penetration they never since approached.

For the years between 1960 and 1996 researchers rely most heavily on self-reporting from the larger comic publishers who, starting in 1960, were required by U.S. law to make available their average paid circulation each year (Miller 2012). These statements became a new and regular resource for those tracking comics sales, but given their limited scope – average circulation – they did not provide detailed sales statistics for any given publisher or a comprehensive overview across the industry. Though required by law, statements were filed irregularly and many were not preserved, resulting in gaps in the data. When statements did get filed they were not subject to any independent verification. It is during this period that specialty retailers, such as those dealing exclusively in comics, began to emerge and distribution methods changed. ‘Regular’ retailers, such as pharmacies and newsstands, had always followed the method for wholesale purchase of comics also employed for magazine purchases: any items not sold after a certain period could be returned to the publisher or distributor for a refund.<sup>99</sup> Specialty comic shops, which began to appear in the late 1970s and grew steadily in number until the 1990s, arranged a different system whereby they agreed to keep everything they purchased from publishers or distributors in exchange for discounts on the volumes they purchased. These shops could then pass the discounts on to customers, who could in turn be sure their local shop would have their favourite comic in stock every

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<sup>99</sup> This is also a factor adding to the possible inaccuracy of the self-reported circulation figures, which may not have reliably included these returns, without which it is difficult to estimate retail sales figures as opposed to wholesale figures that do not represent individual buyers, those most likely to read the comics.

month, as opposed to the changing and unreliable selections usually carried by non-specialty retailers month by month. The success of comic shops during that period indicates the growing number of comic collectors and speculators, customers who were not only selective about their purchases but about the condition of their purchases as well. Unlike newsstands, comic shops could promise their customers pristine, undamaged copies for purchase and, increasingly, for preservation against possible future appreciation. This trend would continue to grow through the 1980s and early 1990s until a crash in 1993, which I discuss in chapter one.

## **The Graphs in Chapter Two**

The graphs presented in chapter one are based largely on data collected and presented on 'The Comics Chronicles' (Miller 2012) website. In some cases I have also relied on the work of other comics scholars (primarily Bongco 2000; Gordon 2001; Wright 2001), each of whom rely themselves on blends of primary and secondary sources. Prior to 1997, sales data are only available for certain years with irregular gaps spanning between one and seven years of missing data. Therefore, the lines connecting the points on these graphs may mask more nuanced variances in sales during those periods and are meant only to signify general trends across decades.

Another difficulty in trying to ascertain superhero comic readership is that all available figures for the period of 1940-1955, as well as for 1971 and 1974, are estimates of comic sales by retailers in those years. However, the only figures available for 1960, 1967 and the

period of 1981-1993 were of comics *published*. In order to keep those figures closer in line with sales figures used in other years and graph all data together, I have reduced the 'comics published' totals by 20%, an estimate of the average returns by non-specialty retailers for those years.<sup>100</sup> As discussed in chapter one, all data for the period of 1997-2006 is based on estimates calculated by Diamond Comics Distribution which, by late 1997, had become the principal distributor for Marvel, DC and most other large publishers, operating as 'middle man' between publishers and specialty retailers. These figures therefore ignore sales of monthly comics by other distributors, by non-specialty distributors such as newsstands and bookstores, or sales of trade-paperback reprint comics (I address these points below and in more detail in chapter one).

In 1996, the periodical *The Comics Buyer's Guide* (CBG) began to collect sales data from the two largest distributors of comics in North America and Great Britain, Diamond and Heroes World Distribution. The data collected by CBG thus became an increasingly reliable metric for drawing conclusions about superhero-comic penetration in North America and started to be published in annual volumes called *The Standard Catalogue of Comic Books*. More recently those data have become available in aggregated form online, at the website

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<sup>100</sup> Returns would have accounted for a much larger difference between issues published and issues sold in the 1960s than in the 1990s. As discussed above, in the 1960s all sales were through regular retailers who relied on the standard return system used for all magazines. In the 1990s only a small percentage of comic sales would have come from such retailers, while the bulk would have been made through specialty retailers who did not return comics to publishers.

'The Comics Chronicles' (comichron.com). Most data reported on and analyzed by comichron.com are based on Diamond's self-reporting of orders and sales to specialty retailers. It is important to note that these sales are confined to traditional or 'regular' (or 'floppy') monthly comics sold by specialty comic shops; as such they do not include sales for 'manga' comics which originate mostly in Japan, comics ordered and sold by non-specialty stores such as bookstores, newsstands and pharmacies, or 'comics with spines' such as graphic novels and trade-paperback reprints, which are widely distributed through brick-and-mortar and online book-retailers. Diamond also relies on a representative sample rather than its entire repertoire to provide data – thus the statistics created by CBG and comichron.com are based most often on Diamond's 'Top 300', a statistic calculated based on estimates of the average distribution of the 300 most-highly distributed comics every month. John Jackson Miller, the primary researcher for CBG and administrator of comichron.com, has asserted to me that Diamond's Top 300 represent 70-80% of all regular comics sold in the US market. Diamond also releases data on the dollar-sales of their top-selling trade-paperbacks (TPBs); however, they do not release data on the number of TPBs sold, and this complicates attempts to collate all CBG data to form a comprehensive image of the total 'superhero' or even 'comic' (including TPBs) market. I point out these difficulties in chapter one when I present some graphed comic-sales data.

Despite the limitations just reviewed, these figures are used most widely by researchers because of their reliability, validity and regular release by Diamond, making the years since 1996 the most carefully charted in terms of comic-sales.



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