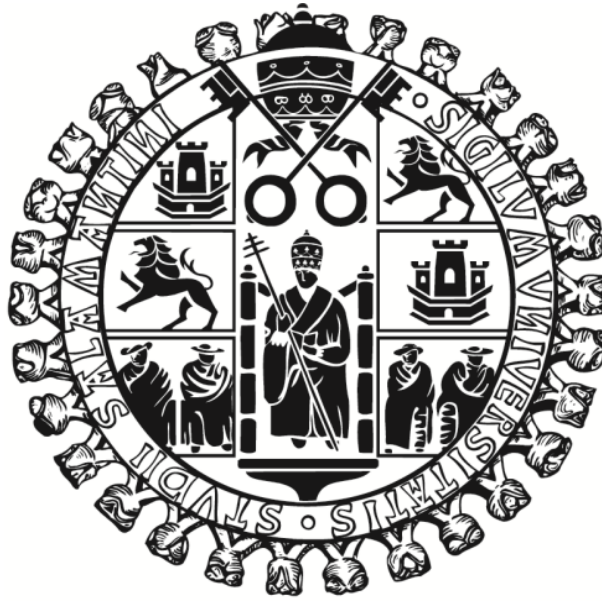


UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA  
FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA  
DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGÍA INGLESA



Language of Supermen: Context, Metaphor, and Translatability of  
Marvel Comics' Main Superhero Titles, 1961-1969

TESIS DOCTORAL REALIZADA  
POR  
GABRIEL RODRÍGUEZ MARTÍNEZ

BAJO LA DIRECCIÓN DE  
DR. MANUEL GONZÁLEZ DE LA ALEJA

SALAMANCA



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Rodríguez Martínez bajo la dirección del Dr. Manuel  
González de la Aleja

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V° B° Director

Autor

Dr. Manuel González de la Aleja Gabriel Rodríguez Martínez



*To my super family: mom, dad, Giovanni, and abuela Irma.*

*Though nothing will*

*drive them away*

*We can be heroes*

*Just for one day.*

*-D. Bowie*

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Though I began this dissertation believing that I would not succumb to this part of the ritual (and instead opt for a blank page), here I am thinking of a few words to leave. It suddenly crossed my mind that it would seem a little disrespectful to myself and everyone who has helped me along the way to not say anything about anyone. Therefore, here it goes.

First and foremost I would like to thank my mother and my father for their unending support throughout my ventures. I have always joked that if my life had gone awry and I had decided to become some sort of criminal early on, they would have bought me my first gun. That is the sort of love and support that they have given me since day one. Regardless of my rebellious attitude and other disagreements that I might hold against them, my path in life has held one consistent mantra: to honor their trust and support. That, I believe, had influenced me to strive to become a better student, a better professional, and overall better human being. Here is to your honor, sir and madam.

Thanks to my brother for being the greatest sidekick life could ever grant me. Even though time and interests have finally built a space between our frequent encounters, we still have thirty years of adventures from which we can reminisce. I wish you the best in your new ventures in life.

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source of inspiration and a beacon of improvement as I look up to you for ways to improve myself every day.

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As a comic book reader and avid pop culture follower, there are certain “musts” that one must have in order to have a healthy and productive hobby. One of these things is a comic book store where one goes not to only buy comics, but to talk about comics as well. During my time in Salamanca, I found such place in Tienda Dtbos and its owner Juan Manuel Conde. I spent countless hours talking about comics and learning about the European perspective comics history—something that the American experience is completely ignorant of. A few months after I returned to my country, Juan suddenly fell ill and passed away. I did not have the chance to say goodbye and, honestly, I do not think I will get over that fact anytime soon. Wherever you are, Juan, you are a part of this.

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To everyone who I may seem to have left out, do not believe so. You are in here as much as every aforementioned name. Trust me.

Thank you.

# Introduction



The “germ” for this dissertation was cultivated during an encounter with Terrence Hawkes’ *Structuralism and Semiotics* in 2013. At the moment, our attention was directed towards the study of opinions in a language and how embellished truths (“myths”) regarding any subject could enter a culture or society through its lexicon. During a reading of Hawkes’ text, a couple of paragraphs stood out from the rest as thought-provoking. Unbeknown to us at the moment, these lines would set the course for a future research venture:

In the past, he points out, myths have been subjected to methods of interpretation which seriously conflict, not only with each other, but with the essential nature of the myths themselves. They have been seen as collective ‘dreams’, as the basis of ritual, as the result of ‘a kind of esthetic play’, and mythological figures themselves have been thought of as ‘personified abstractions, divinized heroes, or fallen gods’ (SA, p. 207). None of this can be considered satisfactory since it serves merely to reduce mythology to the level of child-like play, and denies it any more sophisticated relationship with the world, and with the society that generates it.

Levi-Strauss’s concern is ultimately with the extent to which the structures of myths prove actually formative as well as reflective of men’s minds: the degree to which they dissolve the distinction between nature and culture. And so his aim, he says, is not to show how men think in myths, but ‘how myths think in men, unbeknown to them.’ (40-41).

The text, of course, speaks of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and his contributions to the study of language and myths. As research into the matter continued, we became acquainted with other early-nineteenth century linguists and anthropologists that worked towards the de-mythification of myths. These belonged to a movement that sought to change the mass understanding of myths from mere fantasy to culturally and socially-relevant creations. But why did these paragraphs peak our interest? What was there in

our contemporary context that mirrored myth's initial perception of "child-like play," and that also required revision in the form of in-depth analysis?

By 2013, the world had undergone a series of drastic changes in under a decade. Emerging technology had almost erased all cultural and language boundaries by connecting citizens from —almost— all nations through the internet or, more specifically, social media. The presence of this platform quickly redefined how people interacted and shared information on a daily basis. Among the first areas that benefited by the directed attention of an interconnected world was mass or popular culture. Niche products, properties, and narratives quickly found spaces in the digital world as individuals from across the globe established connections based solely on their similar interests.

One such category that excelled exponentially in these spaces were superheroes and, by relation, comic books. Superheroes had come a long way since their introduction and glory days as centers of academic discussions. In the sixties and early seventies, it was common for intellectuals such as Umberto Eco to write an essay or two on the mythological traits of Superman, or to find Marvel mogul Stan Lee in a college campus discussing the social metaphors behind his narratives. But in the decades that followed, a series of bad PR decisions by the companies who owned the characters created the impression that superheroes did not deserve anything more than a child's attention. Today, thanks to the internet and the social media phenomenon, superheroes have made somewhat of a comeback. But even though they have been able to redefine their purpose and fit most of today's standards, their return has not been accompanied by the same level of sophistication it once



had. The perceptions that regard superheroes as juvenile entertainment have made their way into contemporary mentalities and dominated the mainstream opinion. Therefore, if the superhero is to completely return and retake its place among the discussions that validate them as culturally or socially relevant, an effort must be established towards a de-mythification of the superhero's perception, just as it was once done with the perceptions of myths. This dissertation is a step towards that direction.

### **UNDERSTANDING THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM**

To understand why superhero interest was able to peak without the same level of depth as before, one must take into consideration two other equally-important factors that were simultaneously emerging during the first decade of the twenty-first century: nostalgia culture and big-production superhero adaptations. Nostalgia culture can be best summarized as one of the earliest consequences of the internet age. As soon as the world wide web established its function as a database for a wide variety of topics, users instantly began searching for those brand names that rekindled old sentiments. Some may object and note that wanting to revisit the past is not a new phenomenon nor that it implies something negative. Historians and aficionados of any discipline do it often without any side effects. Yet the shallowness with which new technology facilitated the worship of an immediate history is significantly different. Music critic Simon Reynolds, in his book *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, studies a similar phenomenon through the lens of popular music which he calls

“retromania” (a *portmanteau* of the words “retro” and “mania”). Early in his book, he traces a line between the worship of retro music from other, academically-driven studies of historical nature, and notes that modern infatuation with the past is singular in the fact that it spans to cover *recent* memory and not wider historical periods, as it is done in any historical study:

But there has never been a society in human history so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of *its own immediate past*. That is what distinguishes retro from antiquarianism or history: the fascination for fashions, fads, sounds and stars that occurred within living memory. Increasingly, that means pop culture that you already experienced the first time around (as a conscious, pop aware person, as opposed to stuff that you lived through unaware as a small child) (xiii-ix).

For Reynolds, another factor that separates “retromania” from scholarly endeavors is the fact that, at the heart of the effort, there is a yearning to relive the past, not to document it. Our idea of “nostalgia culture” resembles Reynold’s concept except in one small requirement. Whereas Reynolds “retromania” demands a conscious consumption of popular culture-related things, “...that means pop culture that you already experienced the first time around (as a conscious, pop aware person, as opposed to stuff that you lived through unaware as a small child),” our concept includes pop culture that has been consumed regardless of one’s awareness of the matter. In other words, the things we consumed in spite of knowing whether they belonged to a larger cultural movement or subcategory.

At the heart of it all, there is a sentimental value that one seeks to replicate, and this sentiment is almost always good instead of bad. We do not wish to remember how it felt to wake up every morning and go to school, nor do we long for those Sundays that we spent at church after being dragged by

our parents. Instead, we yearn for those times when we were partaking in something that gave us pleasure: the sensation that we had when our favorite artist's music video came on the television screen because we had no power over which music videos were played; the feeling of waking up on a Saturday morning, grabbing a bowl of our favorite cereal and sitting down to watch hours of our favorite cartoons; or going to the supermarket with our parents and have them buy a comic book that you grabbed off a spinning rack. Coincidentally, all these memories hold some sort of relationship with popular culture (even cereal brands or characters) and fall into the list of events many wish to replicate. Whether they belonged to popular culture or not does not matter; the consumption and the emotional ties to them is what one seeks to remember.

It should be no surprise, then, why nostalgia culture presents a problem when coupled with the superhero's return. Nowhere in our childhood did we watch anything related to Superman and think of the nineteenth-century Jewish immigration experience. We surely did not watch a Madonna music video on MTV thinking about female empowerment or gender roles for that matter. The superhero has only been able to return partially because nostalgia culture focuses on the emotion and not on the substance. Along with the sensations it seeks to replicate, there is also an element of simpler times and less responsibilities— and that includes less knowledge of world or body politics.

The second factor behind the superhero's lax return deals with the success of superhero films and the format's effect on established mythological

narratives. Superhero adaptations have existed ever since the early days of the characters (Captain America has a long-forgotten 1944 serial film, while Batman had also made its serial debut a year earlier, in 1943), but they have never been known for being any good. Throughout the decades, one can see adaptations constantly popping up at any given moment only to succumb to negative critical reception. This, in turn, prolonged a distrust from movie studios that vowed not to return to superheroes each time a project failed with audiences. The reason for their bad quality was a lack of trust between movie executives and the comic book source material, which resulted in characters being adapted without acknowledging important elements that made them recognizable to consumers. That was until the late nineties, when the world witnessed a series of comic book adaptations that managed to grasp some of the essence of the source material to the wide acclaim of consumers.

*Blade* premiered on August 21, 1998 and surprised comic book and movie fans alike. The movie's combination of special effects and action scenes persuaded many into thinking that comic book adaptations could be given another chance in this day and age. Of course, the film was not the product of a void; decades-long superhero adaptations in both the animated and live-action realms eventually led up to its formulation.<sup>1</sup> But the significance of *Blade* is magnified when one considers how it changed perception of superhero films (particularly from Hollywood movie executives), and how that allowed for large amounts of money to be invested in adaptation

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<sup>1</sup> For a thorough exploration on Marvel's animated adaptations through the years and how they eventually came to influence the modern cinematic universe, read "Sowing the Seeds: How 1990s Marvel Animation Facilitated Today's Cinematic Universe" by Liam Burke.

thereafter. Throughout the following years, it became common to see one or two superhero adaptations per year. Most of them were hits or misses, as a definitive formula for success had not been established yet. This became the norm until years later, when Marvel Studios, using the internet and nostalgia culture to their advantage, finally cracked the code which led to the birth of their incredibly successful cinematic universe in 2008.

It would be logical to assume that the sudden commercial success of a film genre would prioritize corporate interests instead of consumer interests as it has done in the past. For a while, that was the case, but the emergence of internet and nostalgia culture even served to keep that ill at bay. Movie makers and executives, who were also connected to the internet, were constantly reminded of what consumers wanted in their adaptations by the consumers themselves. Thus, in order to maximize profits (understanding that the children of the sixties, seventies, and so on were now adults in possession of capital), movie studios began catering to fans by paying attention to the source material in the comics. This did not necessarily ensure the creation of good adaptations, but it did allow for the possibility adaptations that were closer to the source texts.

The negative aspect of the modern superhero trend comes as a result of decades-long narratives being adapted into a limited setting. Comic book's serialized nature has allowed characters to grow and maintain their presence among readers; yet, film's limited time and space does not transfer that characteristic on to those who would only consume the adaptations. Media Studies lecturer Liam Burke, in his essay "Sowing the Seeds: How 1990s

Marvel Animation Facilitated Today's Cinematic Universe," references an idea from French film scholar André Bazin to comment on how film adaptations are supposed to make the source material accessible to non-readers, but notes how the comic book's serialized nature might present a problem to that premise:

French film scholar André Bazin argued that adaptation was a process of "digest" as the literature is "made more accessible through cinematic adaptation." However, where a film adaptation of a novel might need to compress a couple of hundred pages of a book into a two hour running time, an adaptation of a serialized comic will often need to distill years, if not decades, of stories (112).

The concern with compacting narratives is not that the movie consumers will never see the whole of the story—for that we have sequels—the problem with limited productions is that they do not instill the continuation or presence that is required to establish a character's mythological value. Without the comic book stories to fall back on, many newcomers will consume the films on a strictly superficial level. They will see a limited story, with its own limited conflict and established resolution, and that will be all. In this aspect, they will see ordinary characters with no cultural or historical value.

For the most part, this second factor mostly affects newcomers to the genre. Though they might have known about the character's existence prior to consuming a film, they will not reinforce the experience with any other material that ensures a character's longevity. Evidence can be seen each time a superhero film is released and their attention does not translate to comic book sales (Reineke; Donovan; Doran). The movie adaptation boom, though an

excellent way to make consumers acquainted with superheroes and their stories, does nothing for their consideration beyond the silver screen.

## OUR STUDY

Regarding the superhero as myth, there are a number of obstacles when researching previous work. The first is that they are few and sporadic, appearing with decades in-between at times. Examples include Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957), Umberto Eco's "The Myth of Superman" (1972), Richard Reynolds's *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (1992), Marco Arnaudo's *The Myth of the Superhero* (2013), and Andrew R. Bahlmann's *The Mythology of the Superhero* (2016), to name a few. The second is that, while the earliest publishings (Barthes and Eco) were focused on a linguistic aspect of the matter, the rest have been based on a purely comparative approach. These later publications follow a structure established by mythologist Joseph Campbell and his seminal work *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Campbell used psychoanalyst theories from Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung to establish patterns between the mythologies of cultures from around the world. He then proceeded to compare their structure to highlight similarities and comment on the psychological structures of their creators. It is our belief that this approach, though valid in its own right, is too simplistic and does not venture beyond pointing out similar traits in narratives. If we wish to bring back the superhero's cultural relevancy, we must approach them through a discipline that defines a culture: language. If superheroes (like myths) are a language and, as evidence points, since they are also *made of*

language, then they behave as languages do and must share a common systemacity. Therefore, superheroes are eternally-mutable objects that borrow from their cultural contexts, are able to use metaphors in order to deliver nuanced meaning, and can also be translated into other settings.

On the subject of the superhero and language, to our knowledge, there is very little or no recent work that explores the connections between them. An internet search of the subject will only result in superhero dictionaries or children's books that use superheroes to teach a determined language. There are, however, scores of writings that can be used to connect language to myth and myth-making. These include other texts by Barthes' and Eco's (including the aforementioned pieces), as well as works by Edward Sapir, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ernst Cassirer, Roman Jakobson, Julia Kristeva, Paul Friedrich, and more. We make use of these theorists along with comic book theorists to establish a connection between language and superhero narratives, so that we can then bridge the gap from superheroes to myth later on. The language of comic books is not synonymous to language in a general sense (only in systemacity), but the relationship between language and myth is strikingly similar to the relationship between language and superheroes.

One of language's most notable characteristic is the fact that it is shaped by the context in which it is spoken. This trait serves as the focal point of our dissertation and will be present in all the parts to some extent. Because of it, the results of our analysis might feel similar because they explain a simultaneous phenomenon that occurs throughout different phases of a superhero narrative's trajectory, yet the theories (and concepts) that lead to



their explanation are different since they belong to different academic approaches. In the first part, titled “Context,” the link between language and superheroes is established from a purely historical viewpoint. The chapter begins by opening the scope of Comic Book Studies, which, until recent, have kept a minimalist approach according to Belgian comics theorist Thierry Groensteen. The comics scholar, in his *The System of Comics* book, urges researchers to move past the lines on the page into a “wider” scope in search of meaning. Then, we discuss the relationship between writer and illustrator to find similarities between the relationship of a writer and their translator. By establishing their working relationship as similar to that of a language, we move on forward to apply language theories such as Jacques Derrida’s *exteriority* concept, which speaks of the external elements in a language’s culture that influence its everyday use and, by consequence, give meaning to words and images. Like the everyday use of language, superhero stories carry traits that are relevant to the society that produces them. It is here that we begin our analysis of the Marvel comic books published from 1961 to 1969 and reveal them as in constant conversation with their *exteriority*. Superheroes, as language, are influenced by context and evolve with the lines of their culture’s lexicon.

The second chapter, “Metaphor,” is centered around another quality of language which is the ability to speak in distanced truths. The superheroes, as metaphorical manifestations created by the authors to distill a narrative, are able to represent whole narratives and the key towards unveiling them lies in history itself. For this, we establish the roots of metaphor and distancing of

meaning (“truth”) from the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche. Furthermore, we explain myth as the result of language’s tendency to speak in metaphors (Cassirer) and equate them to the comic book language’s tendency to use superheroes when delivering a narrative endowed with meaning. According to Giambattista Vico, a metaphor is a deliberate “mistake” purported by a user with the intention of delivering a heightened message (qtd. in Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*). Vico’s statement recognizes the fact that metaphorical and mythical language are driven by an author’s intent (which is, as explained in the first chapter, influenced by the context) and serves a specific message or purpose within a particular use. The role of the comic book creators is important and comparable to that of the *bricoleur* or myth-maker. The chapter then analyzes a series of deliberate “mistakes” found in the Marvel comics of the decade, and unmask the purposes behind them according to the immediate context.

Finally, the third chapter is titled “Translatability” and speaks of yet another characteristic found in both language and myths: the ability to outlast generations by integrating changes. Already having established that language and myths are affected by historical and cultural surroundings, we now add the passing of time to the equation. Up close, languages change little by little as years go by. But looked on from a distance, meanings and uses change drastically in the span of decades. Thus, we present the idea that superheroes, in order to survive the passage of time, have admitted changes to their languages in order to stay relevant. Their process of adaptation is comparable to translation and localization which tend to look for linguistic equivalencies

in order to transmit the meaning of the source. For our object of analysis, we focus on the Marvel Cinematic Universe: a translation of the comic book narratives for the film medium that has become popular in recent decades. These versions, as translations, have taken some of the source material and adapted it to fit a new form of consumption and audience. The process, according to film adaptation theorists such as Linda Cahir and Patrick Cattrysse, is similar to translation because both give way to completely new or different manifestations of the source accounts. Old language is replaced by new language with hopes that it will resonate better with contemporary audiences, but a balance must be kept as to avoid angering the followers of the mythologies.

#### **DEFINING LANGUAGE**

Lastly, we must clarify what is meant by “language” throughout the dissertation. It is by no means a conservative definition where only a specific form is considered. Rather, language in this context encompasses a range of manifestations ranging from the textual, the visual, and even the thematic as long as they are forms of expression that are influenced by social factors such as history, economy, politics, or a combination of the three. Language is the muscle that beings exercise when trying to comprehend what surrounds them and it is also the funnel through which they make those surroundings understandable to others. The use of language is not, as Edward Sapir established, restricted to communication: “It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that

language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection” (qtd. in Hawkes 31). Language is, thus, everything that users endow with meaning with the purpose of channeling a message relevant to a particular setting (physical or historical).

Semiotically speaking, written language is a representation of spoken language, but this does not prioritize any one over the other. Though there was a time long ago when both were seen as coming from different sources, we ascribe —once again— to Jaques Derrida’s *exteriority* concept which establishes that both manifestations come from the same source of inspiration. Furthermore, we follow Saint Isidore of Seville’s idea presented in his *Etymologies* where he states that written language is a visual manifestation of language:

Indeed, letters are tokens of things, the signs of words, and they have so much force that the utterances of those who are absent speak to us without a voice, [for they present words through the eyes, not through the ears] (Barney, et. al. 39).

From this definition, we can make the jump (an “intersemiotic leap,” according to Roman Jakobson) into other visual realms such as images. Drawings of objects are representatives of said object and therefore transfer its meaning. A particular use of a color or a specific setting in a drawing would suppose a deliberate decision from the artist that is also conditioned by the context in which the artists lives. The object, the image, and the message that is intended to be delivered through the artist’s decisions are but another manifestation of language.

The road to redeeming superheroes may be a long one, particularly when one takes into consideration the current state of perceptions. Our contemporary society relies on a large amount of entertainment industries that the task of distinguishing the copious amounts of narratives by their mythical potential becomes very difficult. Countless narratives in different mediums have blurred the lines of what is culturally and socially relevant, and what is simply “child-like play.” In addition, the growing indifference towards these subjects among academics is at an all-time high. Researchers would rather write about a clear-cut topic than interpret narratives from the popular culture sphere. But the superhero is different. Its arrival and subsequent reinventions have coincided with times of cultural revolution and it is no coincidence; culture, language, and hero narratives are all inextricably linked. The superhero must be recognized as a symbol of cultural trends than progresses along with the mentalities of the society that see its creation. Only then will we further the study of mythological narratives and the mentalities of those who continue with this or other similar classical storytelling traditions.

# Chapter 1: Context

Without context, words and actions have no meaning at all. This is true not only of human communication in words but also of all communication whatsoever, of all mental process, of all mind, including that which tells the sea anemone how to grow and the amoeba what he should do next.

-Gregory Bateson

In the comic-book field especially, almost anything can be a viable idea. Each day's assortment of reader's mail contains enough ideas to keep us in business for centuries. Unfortunately, however, ideas are only the tip of the iceberg. The crucial point is what use you make of the ideas.

-Stan Lee

### *1.1. Approaching Comics Analysis from High*

Throughout the twentieth century until now, comic book theorists have struggled with —and failed— defining comics. Their attempts have been fueled by a lack of acknowledgment from many in academia who still dismiss the medium as a mere form of entertainment incapable of depth. The case for comics, if one is allowed to call it that, and comics theory saw its roots during the sixties when film theory was recognized by scholars and became the center of discussions. This gave comic theorists a structure on which they could base their argument, which was already established and approved by contemporary intellectuals. Thus, comics theory was founded upon Saussurean linguistics,

the then-contemporary trend of structuralism, and, to a greater extent, semiotics. But, in a precipitated move to distance itself from the other forms that coincided in the use of the aforementioned disciplines, comic theorists focused on units and their capacity to carry out a narrative because they saw it as the trait that distinguished them from other mediums. This limitation of the comic book to one of its elements would have an effect on how theorists defined (or could not define) the medium and prevented further analysis from developing while other forms progressed significantly.

One of the arguments with which most comic theorists agree on is the idea that comics are *a* language. This approach is by no means unique to the medium and neither is the logic behind it. During the seventies, Christian Metz, a cornerstone of film theory, sought to uncover the parallels between systems such as that of language and cinema that Russian Formalists had been alluding to since the 1920s. Using Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of *langue* (language system) in the study of language (linguistics) as a starting point, Metz's research began with the assumption that "the object of cine-semiology was to disengage the cinema's signifying procedures, its combinatory rules, in order to see to what extent these rules resembled the doubly-articulated systems of 'natural languages'" (Stam, "Contemporary Film Theory" 75-76). He reached the conclusion that, since film did not present characteristics of speech in the broad sense but did present a language-like "systemicity," film was then a *langage* (language) in itself (Stam 76). Therefore, comic theorists also agreed that, like film, comics have a particular system through which their message is encoded. The system can also be viewed as a language



because it requires the reader to have an understanding of its elements in order to decode the message.

The language approach to comic books saw its first inclination in the study of minimal units. In film, minimal unit analysis focused on the elements that make up a scene such as lighting and color as articulations of the encoded message. In comics, the analysis focused on the elements —lines, color, marks — that make up a panel in a similar way. But this is where the comics/film theory joint venture ended. While film theory eventually moved on to other approaches such as psychoanalysis, feminist theory, and intertextuality to name a few, comics theory did not move far from its minimalist perspective. In the introduction to his book *The System of Comics* (published in English in 2007), Thierry Groensteen acknowledges the lack of progress in a section titled “The useless dispute about signifying units.” Although he does not discredit the minimal approach entirely, he does recognize the implications it has had on the study of comics: “I am convinced that we will not arrive at a coherent and thoughtful description of the language of comics by approaching them on this level of detail ... On the contrary, we need to approach **from high** (emphasis added), from the level of articulations...” (4-5). This “high” approach that Groensteen suggests requires theorists to focus on the panels because they “never make up the totality of the utterance [message] and must be understood as a component in a larger apparatus” (5). Even though Groensteen’s theory is about the language systemacity of comics, it also opens the doors for new approaches in comic studies that expand beyond the language *of* comics and into the language *in* comics. The panel is the constant

element in comics that is tasked with delivering a message to readers. Its meaning comes from a team of a writer and illustrator (or an individual, should a person have the talent to do both) and these, in turn, take their inspirations from individual experiences that shape their craft.

A comic book is a collaboration between two equal authors: a writer and an illustrator. The task of a writer is to contribute the descriptions and dialogue of the story while the illustrator turns the descriptions into visual representations and makes decisions that add to the storytelling. Both are well versed in their fields and contribute to the finished product. Because of this, readers can recognize a writer's words just as they recognize an illustrator's visuals as they become acquainted with the medium. Comic theorist, writer, and artist Scott McCloud illustrated this working relationship in his 1993 book *Understanding Comics*. He began by drawing both writer and artist shaking hands as a sign of agreement towards a common goal. They then separate in order to focus on perfecting their respective crafts. This is the phase where both expand their vocabulary, acquire techniques, and fill up on experiences from a number of sources that may extend beyond their immediate field. Finally, they come back to work stating that "Both have mastered their arts. His brushstroke is nearly invisible ... her descriptions are dazzling ... They're ready to join hands once more and create a comics masterpiece" (48). Granted, this is a highly romanticized telling of how events occur, but it does right in pointing out how both authors work to build their own personality that will be reflected in the completed work.

In his 1996 book *Graphic Storytelling & Visual Narrative*, veteran comic book writer and artist Will Eisner carried the language analogy from comics theory and took it into the comic book-making process by comparing the writer-illustrator relationship to that of writers with their translators:

The process of writing for graphic narration concerns itself with the development of the concept, then the description of it and the construction of the narrative chain in order to **translate** (emphasis added) it into imagery. The dialogue supports the imagery—both are in service to the story. They combine and emerge as a seamless whole (111).

Comics books begin as a script, either plot or full, that is filled with words and then translated into pictures. The difference in this relationship is that the initial form of the text is not meant for the public because it is not the format of the medium. Aside from that fact, the dynamic is identical: the translator (illustrator) works with the source text in order to turn it into their language, which is entirely visual. They have creative liberties as long as they do not drastically alter the meaning of the source text. It is worth mentioning that Eisner preferred that the writer and artist be the same person because he believed this would reduce the possibility of “lost in [visual] translation” cases. But since not everyone has the grace to be as proficient in both disciplines and since publishers tend to favor the two-person process in order to guarantee a faster rhythm of production, we will continue speaking of teamwork without rejecting the possibility of a one-man team.

During the sixties, Marvel brought many innovations to how comics including how they were made and read. The writer-illustrator system was replaced by a new method that kept comic book production up to par with the

demand without having to hire more writers. Editor and all-around comics pioneer Stan Lee oversaw most of the writing duties through a working system that became known as the “Marvel method” due to its popularity. The method consisted in Lee going over the outline or plot of a story with the illustrator, usually Jack Kirby, and then the latter would come up with how the pages looked afterwards. The drawn pages would be given back Lee who would then add the text to the pages:

I had only give Jack an outline of a story and he would draw the entire strip, breaking down the outline into exactly the right number of panels replete with action and drama. Then, it remained for me to take Jack’s artwork and add the captions and dialogue, which would, hopefully, add the dimension of reality through sharply delineated characterization. (Lee, *Origins of Marvel Comics*)

This method has received both praise and criticism for a number of reasons. One side of the argument states that it gave the artists more freedom to express themselves while the other questions the contribution of the writer by saying the illustrator ended up with most of the work burden. Because of this, Lee has been accused on various occasions of taking most of the credit that should have gone to the illustrators. Nevertheless, as author Sean Howe remarks, there are accounts of the Marvel bullpen —name of the Marvel staff and creators— that recall Lee jumping and making poses whenever he explained how he envisioned a scene: “Discussing a fight scene, he’d act out action for artists, standing on his desk, or jumping on the couch, or making voices, as they craned their necks up in disbelief at the balding, exuberant, forty-two-year-old human action figure” (Howe 51). This research will not try to solve

the mystery of how much input Lee actually had in the stories. What actually happened is not of concern to us but rather what came out of it.

The relationship between a writer and illustrator is key when analyzing the meaning of their collaboration. Each individual gathers from personal experiences to tell a unified story in their words or, as Terrence Hawkes worded it, “All writing takes place in light of other writing, and represents a response to the ‘world’ of writing that pre-exists ... Each new novel is not only generated by the pre-existing notion of what a novel is, but it can *change* that notion” (101). A comic book reflects the individual experiences of two authors who come together for the sake of the medium. Their working relationship is also a coming together of two disciplines, two languages that rely heavily on each other and maintain their singularity at the same time. The final product will always be an undefined variable of the negotiation that takes place each time a creative team begins and finishes a comic book-making process.

### *1.2. Context*

The role of context in the comic book-making process is as crucial as the creators’ own experiences. By context we shall refer to the innumerable parts or networks that make up the whole of a social community at a given point in time. It can bear similarity to an ecosystem or, as Jay Lemke proposed, an “ecosocial system,” and within it lies the beliefs, behaviors, dynamics, power structures, tools, and the capacity to give or understand meaning of its inhabitants. History is also key in an esosocial system, since it

not only identifies the particular experience of a community, but it also influences how they perceive signs in the present. People belonging to a particular system carry its essence in their everyday life whether they are conscious of it or not: “Individuals, as organisms, as social subjects, as personal identities, are constructs and products of the activity of the larger self-organizing system, the community and its semiotic ecology” (Lemke 13). Therefore, anything produced within the confines of a community by and for its individuals also carries the essence of the system in them.

Two terms that should be made clear for the benefit of the readers are “ecosocial system” and “semiotic ecology.” The first can be summarized as the combination of material and nonmaterial experiences that preside over a community, and that by consequence, the community identifies with. In an unadulterated sense, they are customs and traditions. The second refers to the influence a culture exerts over the granting and understanding of meaning among its inhabitants. It also involves how said culture projects their community to others. A social ecosystem’s “superiority” is weighed by their influence over other systems and the most common form of achieving this is through the export of culture, in other words, the export of their semiotic ecology. This is due to the productions being loaded with symbols —“linguicized” experiences (Merrel)— that serve as representations of the culture of the authors. Language then, as a channel of expressing meaning, projects the intricacies of a particular ecosocial system throughout its usage: “If language structures the world, the world also structures and shapes language; the movement is not uni-directional. History inflects the structure,

the socially lived system of differences that is language” (Stam, *New Vocabularies* 213-214). In this matter, we distance ourselves from the analysts of yesteryear that often detached the objects of study from their surroundings. The Marvel Silver Age is to be seen as a channeling device for cultural and social mentalities of the context they were created in; a device in which the language of the times was appropriated and used to mask opinions or preoccupations through fantastic storytelling.

Context was not always explored when analyzing a work involving language. For some, the content of a publication was enough to fend for itself because the written word was seen as a secondary manifestation of oral speech, and only speech answered to a larger authority of meaning. The view, commonly referred to as logocentrism, had been a part of Western philosophy since the writings of Aristotle and did not inspire analysts to inquire outside of the work when studying. Founder of deconstruction Jaques Derrida broke with the logocentric tradition by establishing that both forms of communication were actually governed by a much enlarged and radicalized “truth” (truth shall be written in quotes here because of its varying nature depending on cultures and experiences) in his seminal book *Of Grammatology* (first published in English in 1976). He declared that without this “truth,” which exists independently of both forms, none would be able to carry any meaning: “The exteriority of the signifier is the exteriority of writing in general ... Without that exteriority, the very idea of the sign falls into decay” (14). What Derrida calls “truth” or exteriority is the context (or ecosocial system) of the writing being. Context exists as it is, as a standard or set of ideals with which the

inhabitants of a determined group interact on a daily basis but are not necessarily conscious of. When the writing being comes into contact and channels their context or “truth,” they become “secondariness” as Derrida wrote it, and its meaning is reached through mediation: “... the signified has at any rate an immediate relationship with logos [speech] in general (finite or infinite), and a mediated one with the signifier, that is to say the exteriority of writing” (15).

Derrida’s push for the the recognition of writing also rebutted structuralist and post-structuralist tendencies that insisted on a complete or certain truth in their analysis. The deconstruction theory argued that meaning is not absolute because people think and write in signs whose meanings vary from person to person depending on personal experiences. A misunderstanding of *il n’y a pas de hors text* (there is no outside-text), which was translated as “there is nothing outside of the text,” directed much negative attention towards deconstruction, but Derrida sustained that his view “...embraces and does not exclude the world, reality, history...” (qtd. in Stam, *New Vocabularies* 213). In our opinion, it is very difficult not to make the connection between deconstructionism and the inclusion of context when the very object of its analysis, which is criticism, requires the occupation of structures within a text that, in a broader sense, resemble the occupation of social structures by language:

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor they can take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, **because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it** (emphasis added) (Derrida 24).



Derrida opened the doors to modern criticism and gave everyone the key: in order to deconstruct, one must insert oneself in the structure (context) and use its language for one's purpose. The structures vary by text just as meanings vary by cultures. Though the quote refers to structures of a text, they can be applied *verbatim* to the development of social commentary that is possible by inhabiting the structure of a social ecosystem or culture. It is because of this that we argue that, by using language that was part of a larger structure and that was reactive to a particular set of events in history, the Marvel Silver Age can be interpreted as reflective—even deconstructive, at times—of the 1960s in the United States' history. Though no political stance was ever assumed by the Marvel Bullpen, we are also not going to force one on them. Having said that, Stan Lee has acknowledged that a particular tendency has always persisted: “Marvel Comics has never been very much into politics ... I issue no editorial edicts as to what the political tone should be. Actually, most of our writers are young, idealistic, and passionately liberal (*Son of Origins of Marvel Comics* 45). It is amusing to see how youth and ideals are seen as characteristics of the liberal being just after alleging no political affiliation. Then again, we must reiterate, the rumors of the personal lives of our authors are not the focus of this study, just what they produced.

To believe that Derrida was the first to point at context would be highly misleading. The eighties saw a rebirth of semiotics in a way that amplified the scope of meaning to include social and cultural variables. In the field that became known as *social* semiotics, many language theorists of the

past were given a second look and some were found to have called attention to the exteriority of meaning prior to deconstruction. Such was the case of Russian linguist Valentin Voloshinov, whose 1929 book *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (translated into English for the first time in 1973) can be quoted as saying “Every ideological sign —the verbal sign included— is coming about through the process of social intercourse, is defined by the *social purview* of the given time period and the given social group” (21). So not only are the meanings of signs defined by the context according to Voloshinov, they are also constantly being renegotiated (or redefined) by the users within it. In a similar manner, superheroes, as language, as signs that carry ideologies, are limited (or un-limited) to the changing parameters of the context in which they function. The perfect example of this can be seen throughout the development of the Marvel Universe in the sixties. As their popularity rose, the comics included a letters-to-the-editor section in which readers could voice their opinions and, more often than one believes, make suggestions. Stan Lee has been very vocal about how the fans had a hand in the formulation of his characters and stories. The contribution from the readers has been so great that Lee has even gone as far as to insinuate that their opinions *dictated* plots and outcomes: “We learned what they liked, what they didn’t like, what they wanted to see more of... and less of. After a while I began to feel I wasn’t even the editor; I was just following orders —orders which came in the mail” (*Origins* 59). Thus the meanings of Marvel’s superheroes were forged through constant “negotiations” with the readers who suggested changes pertinent to their circumstances. Later in the mid-sixties

Lee would embark in college tours across the United States after noticing a rise in university student readership. He engaged the population in discussions about superheroes, politics, war, and college life in general. The Marvel stories benefited from these interactions which helped the company stay relevant in United States' pop culture throughout most of the decade.

As a result of the mutable nature of meaning, social semiotics does not claim a definitive truth but rather a semiotic *potential* of signs in which the context must be studied for their interpretation. The objects of study are referred to as “semiotic resources” for their production of meaning through known and possible uses, instead of dabbling in the intricacies of its elements:

So in social semiotics resources are signifiers, observable actions and objects that have been drawn into the domain of social communication and that have a *theoretical* semiotic potential constituted by all their past uses and all their potential uses and all their potential and an *actual* semiotic potential constituted by those past uses that are known and considered relevant by the users of the resource, and by such potential uses as might be uncovered by the users on the basis of their specific needs and interests, Such uses take place in a social context, and this context may either have rules or best practices that regulate how specific semiotic resources can be used, or leave the users relatively free in their use of the resource (Van Leeuwen 4).

The Marvel Silver Age as a semiotic resource accounts for all of the aforementioned criteria: The books are made up of signifiers of both textual and visual language; they are tangible objects that include page after page of observable actions for which the characters became recognized; and they were drawn both literally and figuratively into the pop culture domain of the United States where they have maintained their presence for over fifty years. Moreover, the potential of the comic book medium was taken to never-before-seen lengths during the time of the Marvel revolution—a feat that altered the

people's perception of the industry that had already existed for decades. This shift, which most contemporary comic book writers and illustrators agree was the launching platform for the modern comic book, opened the doors to more and more innovations that we still see in the comic book scene today.

Before beginning with the analysis of the Marvel Silver Age, it is imperative that the context in which the comics were made be discussed. We will focus mainly on three elements for the interpretations of our semiotic sources: the superhero as a particular phenomenon of the United States of America; the comic book and entertainment industries pre-1961; and the political atmosphere of the United States immediately before and during the 1960s. The first will situate the superhero within the North American ecosocial system as a manifestation of ideals and preoccupations. The second will shed some light on how the comic book industry worked prior to the Marvel revolution and how specific events affected the entertainment business in general. The third and final will tie the first two as consequences of a larger happening in the political theater of the North American nation. Together they will serve to create the historical framework that will be used for the signs in the Marvel Silver Age of comics.

### **THE SUPERHERO: AS AMERICAN AS APPLE PIE**

Regardless of the innovations the Marvel boom brought to the comic book and superhero genres, it did not create any of them. The fact that we refer to this epoch as the "Silver Age" indicates that there was a previous generation of comics that is also crucial to the history of the medium. The

period, dubbed the Golden Age of comics, will only be looked insofar as how its context paved the way for the Silver Age. This is not to devalue it; such a moment deserves and has been granted whole studies. But, since our main focus is the Marvel Silver Age and the contexts which led up to and occurred during its time, we will only refer to the Golden Age when explaining how it inspired its following movement.

“Like jazz and rock ’n’ roll, the superhero is a uniquely American creation”— these are the words Scottish comic book writer Grant Morrison chose to describe the genre that has become a staple of an universal pop culture scene in its more than 75 year trajectory (49). The specific moment of creation is uncertain, but most coincide that it became popular after the appearance of Superman in 1938 (which also marks the beginning of the Golden Age). Before that moment, people received their dose of fiction from pulp magazines that featured crime fighters who were often referred to as “super-heroes” as well. In an etymology section of his 2006 book *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, author Peter Coogan cites Mike Benton who traced the word as far back as 1917 when it was used to speak of “a public figure of great accomplishments” (qtd. in Coogan 189). The rest of the research is then centered around Will Murray’s essay “The Roots of the Superman!” which explores other fictional characters whose authors also made use of the word. Tarzan, The Shadow, and Doc Savage are among the pulp heroes who were described either as “super-hero” or, in the case of Tarzan, a “superman” prior to 1938. According to Coogan, Murray’s essay implies that since the word already existed and had been used frequently

before Superman, then he cannot claim the first the title of first superhero. Coogan then argues that in the previous instances of the words we can see the “super” prefix being applied as a mere modifier of the noun (thus the reason for it being hyphenated) instead of referring to the genre —narrative, visual characteristics, ideology— as a whole. Because of this, many conclude that even though Superman may not have been the first character to be described as a “super-hero” or a “superman,” he was the first *superhero* as we have come to know them.

A characteristic of the superhero genre that tied it to the U.S. experience was that it mirrored its immediate cultural surroundings since the beginning. Albeit this later proved to be possible in other contexts and accounts for the genre’s propagation across cultures, its origin will forever reflect the ecosocial system of 1930s United States. That is why it is common to find themes of inequality, poverty, and corruption that resounded with the economic troubles of the time in the early superhero strips. In order to mirror effectively, the genre had to borrow again from previous works of fiction. But instead of just adopting a word or term this time, the superhero took character and story structures from the other stories. Coogan attributes the quick acceptance of the superhero to the already-established nature of its components and specifies three cases from where the genre may have borrowed said components:

One reason that it could so quickly coalesce is that the conventions of the genre had been developing for a long time. Its immediate sources come from three adventure-narrative figures: the science-fiction superman, beginning with *Frankenstein* (1818); the dual-identity avenger-vigilante, beginning with *Nick of the Woods* (1835); and the

pulp übermensch, my term for the use of the Nietzschean superman trope in pulp fiction, beginning with *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912) (126).

Though we do not necessarily replicate Coogan's words with the same definitiveness with which he asserts the sources of the superhero genre, we do coincide in that, by appropriating earlier literary tropes, the audience understood (through mediation) and enjoyed it at a much accelerated rate. But this does not mean that what was borrowed was implemented word for word. The superhero genre also brought innovations that would distinguish it from the rest of the competition. Whereas 1930s pulp fiction portrayed the Depression-era mentalities of urban fears and class warfare that often pitted the middle-class hero against high-class corruption and low-class immigrant criminals, superhero stories were about taking a moral stance no matter what class or social background you came from:

Superhero comics thus break ideologically with the pulps that preceded them by presenting a world firmly divided between straight and criminal society. This break began in Superman's stories, but intensified as imitators sprung up and the comics publishers, particularly DC Comics, wanted to appeal to children and their parents by presenting moral heroes operating in a moral universe instead of the sometimes murky world of the pulps (188).

By widening the moral scope, superheroes were more inclusive than its predecessors and therefore appealed to a wider audience. The stories reached far beyond social roles and called upon the virtue of every reader. How else could you explain that an alien (immigrant) from another planet became the first superhero and that the second was an incorruptible upper-class man who used his wealth for the benefit of the less fortunate?

For all the righteousness and gadgets the new supermen held in their grasp, nothing was strong enough to help them escape from the ills of the context they so closely reflected. Views about race, gender, and sexist conduct made their way into the new fictional universe; upholding the status quo and reaffirming the prejudices of many. Over time, the medium's "liberal" tendencies would see it taking stances on these issues, but during its initial years (decade, even), the need for acceptance weighed more. In Julian C. Chambliss and William L. Svitavsky's essay "The Origin of the Superhero: Culture, Race, and Identity in US Popular Culture, 1890-1940," a link is made between Superman creators Joe Siegel and Jerry Shuster's personal experiences as second-generation Jewish immigrants and the characteristics of Clark Kent. Quoting Eric L. Goldstein's observations that "Traits such as nervousness, intellectuality, and lack of physical development were routinely attributed to Jews, making them seem to exemplify the effects of the confining life of the metropolis" (19), Chambliss and Svitavsky argue that in order to sell Kent as a weak figure to the masses, Siegel and Shuster exploited American citizen's prejudice towards Jews. This may have caused a "sting" on the authors who had to reduce their identity to a stereotype, but as Chambliss and Svitavsky noted, the characters caused the readers to empathize and furthermore, we add, even relate to Clark Kent, thereby attracting a fan base comprised of readers from both minority and majority groups.

The genre's popularity continued to rise during its first decade and even saw its first female superheroine in 1941 with Wonder Woman. Created by William Moulton Marston, a psychologist who recognized the educational



potential of comics, she embodied the strong female-in-the-workforce sentiment that had emerged in the United States during World War II. The character's mission was clear from the beginning: in a quote from 1943, Marston explained that "Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power" (qtd. in Tate 148). So in order for society to reap more women with "womanly" qualities, they needed a strong role model. Wonder Woman turned the superhero tropes on the opposite sex and featured a male "sidekick" named Steve Trevor who desired for Diana —Wonder Woman's secret identity— to marry her. Wonder Woman would always turn him down citing reasons such as: "If I married you, Steve, I'd have to pretend I'm weaker than you are to make you happy —and that, no woman should do!" (qtd. in Jones et. al. 216). Her unwillingness to preserve the status quo made her a character ahead of its time that was surprisingly well-received. In 1942, she was granted an honorary membership to a testosterone-driven superhero team featured in *All-Star Comics* after some deliberation, but a dispute with Marston over the character's scripting would ultimately limit her role to being the team's secretary. This did not affect the quality of her own book which kept delivering a steady dose of action and feminism for some years.

After the war ended in 1945, the political powers sought to redefine women's role in society once more. Female public presence was suppressed once the men returned and expected everything to be as it was before the war. In comics, this resulted in the confining of female characters to spaces they believed to be in accordance to their nature: the house, the office, or

matrimony. In a turn for the worst, Marston passed away in 1947 and left his character in the hands of writers who did not carry on with his mission. As the 1950s approached and all throughout the decade, the United States would witness a dark age filled with communist conspiracies and witch hunts that no one would be safe from —not even superheroes.

### **FALL FROM GLORY**

By the year 1950, the United States, fresh from their victory, had entered into a new conflict with Soviet Russia. The dispute arose over the differences in political and economic ideologies of the two superpowers: the United States believed in their capitalist-democratic system while Russia upheld their communist one. What made this war different was that it was not waged with soldiers or weapons like the ones before it. Instead, the tensions that surfaced between the two powers were palpable enough to cast a cloud of fear among the citizens, endlessly prompting them for an impending attack that never came. Because of this, the conflict is referred to as the Cold War. During the time, fear was materialized in the form of a bomb —a nuclear bomb to be precise. This weapon had already been unleashed twice before in Japan at the end of World War II by Allied forces to the horror of many. Now, both the United States and Russia had nuclear bombs of their own, resulting in a stalemate that prevented each nation from engaging directly in combat with the other, but not from exerting their influences through proxies in foreign territories.

Terror within the United States took the form of harsh domestic policies meant to “smoke out” communist sympathizers. Conservative politicians called upon a cleanse of the entertainment business from anything that could “pervert” the nation’s ideology and the growing film industry made Hollywood the most obvious target to make an example out of. In 1947, the House of Un-American Activities (HUAC, for short) subpoenaed ten workers—actors, directors, writers, etc.— from the movie industry alleging ties to the Communist Party. The move would come to be known as the Hollywood Blacklist and the initial subpoenaed group of workers as the Hollywood Ten. The court hearings that ensued would drag over the next ten years, with the workers uniting to form their own Committee for the First Amendment. Whenever a worker was questioned for their relationship to the Communist Party, they would cite the First Amendment which assured them the right to free speech. With no concrete proof of the accusations, the defendants were given one-year sentences for contempt in 1950 (Berry, *The Hollywood Ten*). They would be the first group in an series of HUAC hearings whose blacklist kept growing as the years passed. The persecution reached its peak from 1952 to 1954 under McCarthyism (named after Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy) when people were accused left and right without concrete evidence. Many film careers were shattered and never recovered as a result of the stigma that followed being on the blacklist (Eckstein, 424). Others kept working under assumed names risking being caught and receiving longer jail sentences (424). As the end of the decade neared, the movement began to die down for a number of reasons. The Senate censured McCarthy in 1954

recognizing his recklessness (*Senate Resolution 301*) and, in 1956, the Supreme Court began to slowly undo much of the damage that was dealt. The reparations would keep stretching until the early sixties when the United States was ready to undergo a dramatic change for the best, and immediately after, for the worst.

The comic industry was not spared from offenses of the 1950s. The superhero craze that began with Superman continued throughout the 1940s with new characters like Captain America, but the saturation of “supermen” coupled with the changing political climate burned the genre out. Publishers turned to monsters, romances, and westerns in hopes to avoid bankruptcy due to falling sales. Out of these genres, horror received the best reception for its capacity to represent the people’s fears in the form of creatures. Readers found the tension they lived in stories that, for them, seemed more plausible than men in tights flying off to save the day. Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones remember how it felt walking into a store looking for comic books around this time and noticing that “... something was missing. The heart had gone out of the comic book business. The heroes had vanished” (*The Comic Book Heroes* 3). Writers catered to whatever was the flavor of the week and some, the few who had managed to keep their jobs, even ended up hating the profession.

As if the decline in superhero popularity was not bad enough, comics also had their own form of blacklisting. In 1954, a psychologist by the name of Fredric Wertham, backed by the conservative wave of the time, published a book titled *Seduction of the Innocent* in which he blamed comic books for

corrupting youth. Though his initial quarry was with the graphic nature of horror comics, it were the observations he made on superheroes that dealt the most harm. Wertham suggested that Superman undermined authority through vigilantism, that Wonder Woman's attitude towards marriage was because she was a lesbian, and interpreted Batman and Robin as a homosexual couple among other things. Though researchers would later (more than five decades later) prove that Wertham based his arguments on fabricated, manipulated, and compromised data, the reaction at the time it was published turned public opinion against comics. The book's fame rose and caught the attention of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. Various comic book publishers were cited to testify in a hearing just as the blacklisted film workers were. The publishers that devoted most of their titles to romance and westerns such as Timely Comics (soon to be Marvel Comics) got off with some minor suggestions, but the horror comics house that was EC Comics would not survive the crusade in the same way they entered it. Three of the DC Comics' superheroes that survived —albeit in a very sterile form— were Superman, who now worked with the police to solve crimes; Batman, who added Batwoman to the family as a romantic interest to lead away any scent of homosexual subtext; and Wonder Woman, who finally thought of settling down with Steve. In addition, a Comics Code Authority was installed to regulate future publications. Whoever did not adhere to the code would not be approved (shown with an imprint on each issue) and could not sell the book. The Code also reinforced sexual stereotypes under the pretense of morality. Women were not to be depicted with “exaggerated” physical features (though

the men still could) and anything that might suggest sexual behavior was to be avoided at all times. Unsurprisingly, the Code did not mention anything about race and its lack of presence or negative depiction in comics.

By the end of the 1950s, the comic book medium's reputation was tarnished beyond belief. Sean Howe recalls some sad but funny, in retrospect, anecdotes from writers and illustrators present at the time:

A few months later, on a weekend to Catskills, [Stan] Lee mentioned to a rifle salesman that he was a comic-book editor. "You do comic books?" the man spat at Lee. "That is absolutely criminal— totally reprehensible. You should go to jail for the crime you're committing." Artist Dick Ayers donated an autographed box of comics to his daughter's school fund drive, only to have them returned with a note recommending that they be burned (30).

Grant Morrison further equated the outrage towards comic book workers as "the response at a dinner party this evening if you whipped out your roughed nipples and proudly announced a passion for hard-core pedophile pornography" (54). A total of fifteen comic publishers went out of business during the summer of 1954 because of the pressure and bad publicity that came after the hearings (Howe 31). The few that survived incurred in massive layoffs and reduction of staff. Unlike blacklisting, which saw its downfall in the same decade and had already been swept under the rug by the mid-sixties, the Comics Code would continue its presence until somewhere around the eighties when it became but a small reminder of darker times in comics history. Most publishers would later drop the Code symbol during the 2000s and, in 2011, the last publishers that carried it abandoned it for good.

### THE SILVER AGE: A SHOT AT REDEMPTION

The superhero revival during the beginning of the sixties was but a cog in a much larger piece of machinery that chugged away from the mistakes of the past decade. People coming out of the 1950s were much aware of the dangers of extremism and looked towards a brighter future. The transition found its emblem in a presidential candidate by the name of John F. Kennedy, a Democrat who had served as Senator of Massachusetts from 1953 until 1960. Kennedy personified the spirit of change: he was young, charismatic, and his political views were more liberal than those that had dominated since the end of World War II. Among the numerous other factors that converged during the time was the rise of television. What we have come to know today as mass media and the twenty-four hour news cycle were in their embryonic state during the late fifties-early sixties and Kennedy took advantage of them:

He was also the first presidential candidate to mount both a literary *and* a television campaign for the office, the only one comfortable in both media, and the perfect man for a time when Americans were teetering on a balance point between image and word (Clarke 115).

His charm and good looks translated well into the camera and that made him the talk of the town. Political analysts were either turned on by his youth and energy or questioned the problems those factors could bring. In the end, they all tuned in to watch the televised debates (first ones ever) between Kennedy and his opponent Richard Nixon, who did not enjoy the same publicity from the media. The 1960 United States presidential election received a magnitude of attention that had never been seen before and reclaimed government as a viable career in the eyes of the U.S. public, a notion that had been lost since

the years after the Civil War when private companies and industries had supplanted it.

The optimistic spirit would continue spreading after Kennedy won the election and quickly went to work on a number of matters as president. The Space Race, which had been thought lost after a series of advances by the Russians that included the launch of satellite Sputnik in 1957, became a priority during Kennedy's presidency when the moon landing was established as the ultimate goal. In May 25, 1961, just four months into his presidency, Kennedy spoke before a joint session of Congress and gave a "Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs" speech in which he urged the nation to set a goal of "... landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth" (Online by Peters and Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*). A year later, on September 12, 1962, he gave another speech which came to be known as the "Moon Speech" at Rice Stadium in Houston, Texas. This time he gave insight on how the trip to the moon would spur an aftermath of technological innovations similar to previous milestones such as the printing press and the steam engine. Even though the goal was set to be long-term —by the end of the decade— and the Russians still had the advantage, the citizens of the United States had been rallied up and felt that the task was within grasp for the first time.

Among other affairs that the Kennedy administration handled at the same time were segregation and the reconciliation between government and academics. Work on the first also began as soon as May 1961, when James Farmer led the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in defying segregation by



sponsoring Freedom Rides. Although segregation had been deemed unconstitutional in 1954, the federal government failed to enforce the law and some states kept practicing it years after. The Rides consisted in activists from both races riding buses through the Southern states that still upheld segregated customs (Facing History 8). Some buses were stopped by authorities and the activists were beaten or arrested. Robert Kennedy, John F. Kennedy's brother and Attorney General during the presidency, sent federal marshals to protect riders from any harm while making official the administration's support of desegregation (Lawson and Payne 20-22). Further cementing the stance in 1962, president Kennedy took it upon himself to make sure an African American veteran by the name of James H. Meredith Jr. enrolled in the University of Mississippi. Meredith Jr. had previously tried to enroll on a number of times but was not successful because of his race. The president's negotiations with the governor of Mississippi failed to bring forth a solution. So, being left with no other options, federal marshals were sent to escort Meredith Jr. to the registration office and ensure he was admitted. As a result, riots broke out outside of the school and Kennedy sent the National Guard to calm the protest. By the next day, the University of Mississippi had its first African American student in one of its classrooms (Lawson and Payne 26).

The reconciliation between government and academia began long before Kennedy even thought of campaigning for the presidency. As a Harvard History major, his thesis had become a best-selling book in 1940 under the title *Why England Slept* and his second publication, 1956's *Profiles in Courage*, earned him a Pulitzer Prize in 1957. His love for the liberal arts did

not go unnoticed and it attracted intellectuals. Kennedy reciprocated the interest by giving jobs to those that he held in high esteem, thus changing the way academics were perceived: “Kennedy appointed McGeorge Bundy, John Kenneth Galbraith, Walt Rostow, Henry Kissinger, and Arthur Schlesinger to influential positions in his administration, and academics suddenly became wise men of government, mandarins, and eventually the most cold-blooded of cold warriors” (Clarke 114-115). Furthermore, the Kennedy administration’s invitation was also extended to include artists, as a telegram sent to music composer Aaron Copland from the 1961 presidential inauguration reveals: “During our forthcoming administration we hope to seek a productive relationship with our writers, artists, composers, scientists and heads of cultural institutions...” (qtd. in Clarke 115). These actions helped reestablish the connection between government and the arts, a relationship that had been severed during past administrations when the HUAC acted against the intellectuals and artists that it deemed communist sympathizers.

As a result, the general atmosphere within the United States during this time radiated productivity whether it be scientific, academic or artistic, and it would be only a matter of time before the convergence of these sectors began to spill over to mass culture. The genre of science fiction had mirrored the technological aspirations and political aspects of the Space Race since the fifties, now it was time for superhero comic books to do the same. The earliest sighting of a “science-based” superhero had come in 1956, when the then-editor of DC Comics Julius Schwartz toyed with the idea of reviving a 1940’s superhero, the Flash, in a modern, science-based setting. After a few sporadic

appearances, the character's somewhat of a success earned it a solo title in 1959. This moment in comic's history, as Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones assert, gave way for the reappearance of superheroes:

The Flash sold well enough to return next spring in *Showcase* 8 (dated June 1957), then again in issues 13 and 14 (dated Apr.-June 1958), until at last, taking up where his namesake had left off a decade before, he earned his own title (with *The Flash* 105, Mar. 1959). In doing so, he opened the door for a return of the heroes and showed that fantastic adventure stories, if told properly, could still appeal to a new generation of kids (6).

After the debut of *The Flash* in 1959, more superhero revivals followed such as the *Green Lantern*, who quickly skyrocketed to become DC's most popular superhero surpassing Superman for a brief moment (41). An editorial policy at DC made any character's modernization synonymous to "science-fictionalization" and the other part of the roster that included Batman and Superman followed suit. The new formula had been established and the return of the superhero was imminent. It would only take a couple of more years until someone felt comfortable enough with said formula to add more innovations pertaining to the more immediate context—cue the Marvel revolution.

The beginnings of Marvel are said to be founded on imitation. Legend has it that, in early 1961, Martin Goodman, publisher of various magazines including what was once known as Timely Comics, played a round of golf with Jack Liebowitz, publisher of DC Comics. During an exchange, Liebowitz boasted of his company's recent science-hero success, particularly the recent *Justice League of America* (1960) supergroup, hence Goodman began plotting a counter-group of his own company. The task would be relegated to

Goodman's cousin-in-law, who was also the company's all-in-one comic book editor, director, and writer (48). This person also had the advantage of going by the name of Stan Lee, one of the few workers who had survived the comic book purge of the 1950s. Lee had been going through some personal troubles of his own at the time he was approached by Goodman. Unsatisfied and extremely disappointed with his career, he was readying to quit comics altogether. One day, after expressing his sentiment to his wife, Joan Clayton Boocock, she suggested that he go out with a bang. In the documentary *With Great Power: The Stan Lee story*, Lee recalls his wife's answer as follows:

And she [Joan] said: "Stan, if you wanna quit, why don't you first do one comic book the way you'd like to do it—for a slightly older audience, write it the way you feel like writing it; get it out of your system. The worst that can happen is [that] you'll be fired—but you wanna quit anyway" (Dougas, et. al.).

Unknown at that moment, Joan's words would be the fuel of a whole new generation of comics. Lee went to work on the new project alongside veteran illustrator and recent company acquisition Jack Kirby. Their approach would take DC's "the heroes must triumph by brain, not brawn" (Jacobs and Jones 42) philosophy and add a dimension of humanism that had never been seen before in superhero stories. Kirby would also become synonymous with the Marvel brand throughout the sixties albeit with a *souçon* of neglect. His style would become the standard for modern comics, but it would be Stan Lee who would receive most of the praise. Such carelessness on behalf of Marvel would cost the company dearly at the end of the decade. But for now, the new wave of comics was about to rise and the unknowing public was going to dive head-first into the surf.

### *1.3. Mediating the Marvel Age of Comics*

In an edition of the ABC television program *20/20*, host Hugh Downs recapped a list of memorable events from 1961 as follows: “John Kennedy became president, Alan Shepard became the first American in space, the bikini became fashionable, and Marvel Comics made its debut” (Dougas, et. al.). In reality, what made its debut in 1961 was not Marvel, but the first family of Marvel also known as the Fantastic Four. The Marvel branding would still be a couple of years away, but the fact that a news program placed Kennedy’s presidency and the first American in space on the same list with the first appearance of a Marvel comic shows how deeply correlated these accomplishments are in American culture. Mass culture or pop culture in general soared in the United States during the sixties. In fact, much of the television, film, literature, music, intellectual figures, and schools of thought that emerged during the decade are still regarded as standards because of the influence they still hold over subsequent generations. But how does one mediate all these historical and social ties from the artifacts that have been left to us decades later? The answer, again, can be found in the inner workings of language.

The process behind the mediation of meaning can be attributed to Charles Sanders Peirce, a founding father of the study of signs also known as semiotics. As Floyd Merrel phrased, a very simple and stripped-down definition of the Peircean sign can be “...something that relates to something else for someone in some respect or capacity” (28). Signs can be words —oral

or written—, gestures, and physical objects. An example of them, in a similarly simple fashion, can be the traffic sign for “Stop.” This sign, which is present throughout the world and in different languages, points to the same meaning each time: to stop your automobile. An English speaker who does not know any other language can go to a Spanish-speaking country, drive around, see a sign that says “*Pare*,” and understand its meaning without knowing the language. But why is this? How does the human mind process the same meaning from a different code?

Peirce divided the process through which the mind decodes signs in three categories: firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Although this is just one of the many names he gave the scheme throughout his career, they all involved three categories by their functions but with a slightly different angle. In this version, firstness is defined as the thing or idea in itself with no relation to anything else. It is an essence of sorts, no matter how ideological or fictitious it may be for some. Secondness is the thing or idea (firstness) coming into contact with something else, but without being judged or compared to a third. Finally, thirdness is the capacity of bringing together firstness and secondness through the mediation of some outside (third) knowledge or experience. Continuing with the Stop sign example, the Spanish *Pare* sign would be firstness, the thing “as it is” in this case. Secondness would be the driver coming into contact with firstness, or the stop sign, but without relating it to anything else. Thirdness, as the process that brings the first two together, can be the driver’s knowledge of traffic signs or recognition of the octagonal shape in relation to stop signs in general, anything that serves as a mediator to reach

a meaning. It is important to note that the numbers do not assume a hierarchical system: firstness does not suppose a higher level or importance or priority than the other two. It is just a display of the process that places "... consciousness as the key to the ability of the mind to learn, make inferences, and cognize relations of more than dual character" (Parmentier 36). It is a mapping of how the mind processes outside factors in order to make sense of what it perceives.

Writers, as translators of experiences, mediate meaning from their context as inspiration and turn that into text —into symbols. "The human tendency is to 'linguicize' (symbolize) all signs," proclaimed Merrel (34). Firstness comes from the social and historical surrounding they work in which is reflected in the use of their language. Because of this, we can trace back the meaning of the language in comics and reach the context depending on our knowledge of it. For example, in the first issue of *Fantastic Four* by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, there is a conversation where Ben Grimm (also known as the Thing) explains that the reason behind their space exploration is largely based on Cold War politics. The particular use and connotation of the word "commies" (a derogative term used for the Russians during the Cold War) during the exchange might fly by some readers as something from the past that was seen under a negative light. But those who know more about United States history can immediately place themselves in a Cold War-era mentality that expanded for over 40 years from (roughly) 1947 to 1991. Furthermore, if one wished to close-in on the date, the topic of argument between Richards and Grimm can serve to pinpoint a more precise moment. The group's desire

to launch into space and the utterance of the word “commie” echo the space race between Soviet Russia and the United States during the war. This particular event lasted from 1955 until 1972, almost the same as the comic book Silver Age!. The reader can assume, by mediation, that this particular issue of the Fantastic Four was made during this time and that it may also be reflect the allegiance of its authors. The more knowledge the reader possesses of context, the more meaning they can reach by mediation.

We are by no means saying that comics have one “all-true” meaning, nor that the reader is obligated to possess some background information before commencing a title. Comic book stories can stand by themselves just as well. In other cases, publications classified under the historical fiction or historical account label such as Alan Moore’s *From Hell* (1991-96) or Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1991) include language that points to decades far beyond their moment of creation. They are able to do so by appropriating the language of the times and building a narrative based on those symbols. But in any of those instances, another type of mediation is at play whether it be the reader’s knowledge of Jack the Ripper, World War II and concentration camps, or simply how that particular comic book relates to others. Even the language of comics, which has been comics theory’s object of study, requires the readers to mediate the panels and outside space otherwise known as the “gutter.” According to Will Eisner, the illustrators appeal to the reader’s “commonality of experience” (*Comics and Sequential Art* 13 and *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* 15) which expands beyond their interactions with body and textual language into historical or philosophical knowledge. Scott McCloud



called the act “closure” and added that comics take advantage of the medium’s limits by offering a fragmented sequence of images which in turn causes the readers to fill in the gaps themselves: “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (67). Finally, Thierry Groensteen recalled a number of instances where Jean-Marie Schaeffer, François Gagognet, Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, and others alluded to “...the active cooperation provided by the reader” (9-11) that is performed through mediation.

The use of thirdness and mediation are not exclusive to the interpretation of visual or concrete symbols. A sudden case of stomach pain can be the firstness of a scheme. The mediation will depend on the victim’s previous experience with their digestive system or medical records in case it is a preexisting condition like an ulcer. Another famous and widely used example of firstness is the presence of a cloud of smoke in the distance. As the viewer comes into contact with this cloud of smoke, the severity of the situation is mediated in the many things that can run by their mind: a fire, call for help, keep calm, someone is in danger, and so on. It is important to remember that thirdness will always vary from person to person and among things. Peirce argued that “Thirdness is the human ‘eternal’ value, judged again and again and again in the long run of human history” (qtd. in Gorlée 211). For this reason, some symbols acquire different connotations depending on the values of a particular culture or as time progresses. Others,

deeply rooted and dictated by the context they were used in, can be traced back to the time they were employed in.

The Marvel revolution of the sixties can be divided in phases depending on the context during an issue's moment of creation and publication. The first phase, from 1961 to 1963, reflects the optimism of the time when the United States received a second wind at the Space Race. This moment is characterized by the hunger for scientific explorations and the belief of the American subject's superiority in the writing. The second phase, marred by the assassination of president Kennedy and the escalation of the Vietnam War among other things, begins in 1964 and ends somewhere around 1967. This phase reflects a dark time in American history when the values of the American subject were being questioned. The third phase closes the decade and comes at the same time some internal turmoil shook Marvel, including its sale to the Perfect Film Corporation in 1968, and the escalation of social and political struggles such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. These last years were characterized by changes in perspectives about the war, student activism, and the role of women in society. Due to the connectivity of the themes found in the narratives, we will divide their analysis into three categories: the mirroring of domestic and international politics, socially issues of the epoch, and female representation.

#### *1.4. Phase One: 1961-1963*

Early in 1961, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby went to work on a new group of superheroes that would compete with DC's success. Taking advantage of

the science craze and science fiction boom, they sought to make their group stand out from the others. The new heroes would be heavily influenced by their immediate context, which constantly reaffirmed the identity and superiority of the American nation in the world theater, while deconstructing much of the American being's assumed beliefs and practices. The credit for who exactly contributed what to these narratives has been disputed for decades. When Kirby left Marvel a decade later, he went on to state that most of the creative input was his, but many have called to attention his anger and frustration towards Lee as the source of his harsh comments. Most comic book historians settle for a "half and half" where Lee created a synopsis and Kirby drew the story; otherwise known as the Marvel method.

#### **DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS**

In the first issue of *The Fantastic Four*, dated November 1961 (almost ten months after Kennedy's inaugural and six months after the "Special Message..." address), we are presented with the themes that will be a constant throughout the first phase of the Marvel revolution. After some pages in which the characters are introduced *in medias res*, the origin story kicks off on page nine with a scientist named Reed Richards and his team of explorers who plan a venture into outer space. The main objective of the enterprise is never revealed, but the motivation behind it is made clear when Ben Grimm, concerned about the lack of research on "cosmic rays," needs to be convinced by Sue Storm, who resorts to ideological and emotional blackmail: "Ben, we've got to take that chance... unless we want the commies to beat us to it! I --I never thought that you would be a coward!" (Lee and Kirby 9). The choice

of words takes us to the larger context at play: Lee and Kirby's decision to insert their characters in a real-life setting —Manhattan to be exact— required that everything else from that environment had to be present. This meant that the context's political and emotional baggage would affect the characters who, after all, were also American citizens. The intention behind Storm's words is to remind everyone of their allegiance to the United States and to express their belief that personal success correlates to their nation's success. In this manner, Storm's answer reciprocates the underlying tone of president Kennedy's "Special Message..." speech where patriotic fervor and scientific accomplishments are paralleled:

... if we are to win the battle that is now going on around the world between freedom and tyranny, the dramatic achievements in space which occurred in recent weeks should have made clear to us all, as did the Sputnik in 1957, the impact of this adventure on the minds of men everywhere, who are attempting to make a determination of which road they should take (Online by Peters and Woolley).

Thus the main goal of the expedition is not important. What is important is that they, as upholders of a particular ideology, have to succeed in order for their nation to succeed as well. Their victory would not only imply that their ecosocial system more apt, but that their whole semiotic ecology is the "correct" one.

The ship, as many know, returns to earth and crashes after being bombarded by cosmic rays in outer space. Rising from the wreckage, Grimm resumes his hot-headed persona that had been dormant since Storm questioned his patriotic allegiance and masculinity. He blames Richards for the failure of the voyage and shows it by scorning him. One by one, the members are revealed to have come out of the accident with new abilities: Susan Storm



Fig 1. Assuming moral implications (Lee and Kirby, *FF* #1, page 9)

turns invisible; Ben Grimm turns into a rock golem while charging against Reed Richards, who elongates his arms to restrain Grimm; and finally, Johnny Storm, the youngest member and Susan's brother, turns into a flame-being who can fly. Then, in what seems to be a strange move, the tension between Richards and Grimm is instantly forgotten as Richards breaks to make a speech about the moral implications of having superpowers. Equally as surprising is Grimm's reaction, who jumps ahead of Richards by saying: "You don't have to make a speech, big shot! We understand! We've gotta use use that power to help mankind, right?" (13). The setting aside of differences and the presumption of a reliable execution of power are self-portraits not only of 1960's United States, but of the nation's domestic and foreign policies since the better half of the nineteenth century. They are a manifestation of the American exceptionalism theory, the idea that the U.S. nation was somehow morally superior to others and thus trustworthy of managing power for the benefit of everyone (see Figure 1).

It is in this instant where we first witness Derrida's idea of "inhabiting without knowing" from deconstruction in the Marvel comics. The authors of the book, as Americans submerged in the language of their time, assumed the American ideals into the characters without question. This decision, we presume, was made to connect with readers from the same cultural context, and therefore was done unconsciously of its socio-political connotations. Due to the passage of time, we can now view the scenario and its politically-charged rhetoric as product of a particular context. Furthermore, a closer (chronologically-speaking) event to which we could tie the spirit behind the group's assumption to use their powers for the welfare of others is Kennedy's inaugural address from January 20, 1961, particularly the famous "...ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" line. Here we see how words from the political sphere are portrayed in an almost-militant fashion. Kennedy's line is depicted as a call to arms by those who perpetuate the myth of American superiority. The Fantastic Four, as powerful, privileged beings that reside in the United States of America, understand that they must use their abilities to help the less-privileged because it is their duty and, at the same time, a form of honoring their nation.

The team's notion of American moral superiority is further explored in *Fantastic Four* #13 (dated April 1963) when a communist scientist named Ivan Kragoff decides to replicate the experiment that gave the Fantastic Four their powers. Unlike Richards' group, Kragoff's team is made up of gorillas trained by the scientist and, unlike the Fantastic Four, the language surrounding them does not portray moral or sound judgment. The soviet

character is depicted as egotistical and sadistic, uttering sentences such as “Only a genius such as I, Ivan Kragoff, could have trained a gorilla to operate the space ship!” and, after successfully ordering a gorilla to put on some shoes, “Well done, my monstrous slave!” (Lee and Kirby 4). There is absolutely no implication that his country will gain anything from his scientific accomplishment as was the case of the Fantastic Four. No. Kragoff is only interested in world dominion should he obtain superpowers. It is important to note that the construction, or rather, the demonization of a character due to his communist ideology is also a very common part of the North American semiotic ecology of the time. According to Stanley Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, when an ecosocial system enters a state of “moral panic” in which it perceives its identity being threatened by an outside element, the influential figures of that society create a narrative of the opposing entity that indulges in stereotypes and seeks to stigmatize the other:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, a person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people (qtd. in Krinsky 3-4).

Though it is difficult to know whether Stan Lee or Jack Kirby were “right-thinking people” at the moment the issue was written, the depiction of Kragoff does respond directly to the concept of a “red menace” that many U.S. citizens perpetuated during the Cold War. Even his physical appearance is meant to associate ugliness with wrongness much like the ancient Greek *καλοι και αγαθοι* (the beautiful and the good) correlated beauty with goodness. Finally,

another interpretation that can be attributed to Kragoff is that of the whole Soviet system according to U.S. public opinion. The communist leader starves his workers (gorillas) in order to keep them obedient and rewards them from time to time with small amounts of food as a reminder of the good that comes out of following orders. Support for this argument is found in a scene where the Invisible Girl finds herself captive in a chamber along with the hungry primates who are restrained by an invisible force field. Her plan is to eliminate the force field and free the super-apes because, as it is written, “I would take my chances with **them** [the gorillas], rather than the **Red Ghost** [Kragoff’s supervillain name], for they are like the communist masses, innocently enslaved by their evil leaders!” (Lee and Kirby 19). Her plan works and, as soon as she frees them, the hungry apes go for food instead of her, allowing for an escape. In the end, we see the gorillas turning on their leader after they realize they do not need him anymore.

The next hero to join the revolution, the Hulk, arrived in May 1962. Once again, the science enthusiasm of the times is present since the very first issue: Bruce Banner is an atomic scientist working with the government to test a new “G-bomb” made from gamma rays. Only he knows how to harness the power of the rays and make them work, so an explanation of exactly what they are or where they come from is never given. Banner acknowledges his silence on the matter twice when an assistant named Igor insists in learning the secret of the rays “in case [Banner has] made an error” (*The Incredible Hulk* #1, Lee and Kirby 3). But this time around, the lack of information is not meant to serve as a void in the story like in the *Fantastic Four* before it. The silence is



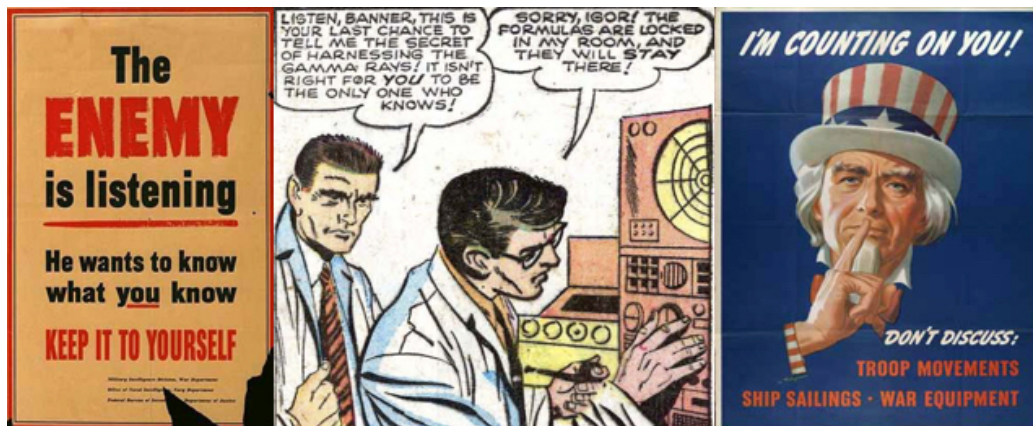


Fig. 2. Silence is golden (Lee and Kirby, *Hulk* #1, page 2)

meant to be interpreted as Banner's loyalty to his nation which had repeatedly reminded everyone to "Keep silent" and that "Loose lips sink ships" through propaganda since the Second World War (see Figure 2). The idea behind the initiative came from the possibility of Russian spies hiding out in common spaces among the population. Everyone was advised to keep quiet from discussing any sensitive information out in the open to avoid leaks. Thus, the less details Banner's character gave, the more he was in compliance with his duty as an American.

To the benefit the reader's prejudices, Banner's assistant does turn out to be a communist spy seeking to steal the gamma ray formula. He is also the one responsible for the Hulk's existence after allowing the experiment to continue once Banner had entered the test area (thinking it would kill Banner and ease the task of obtaining the secret document). After being captured and jailed, "the red spy known as Igor" (15) sends a secret message "behind the Iron Curtain" (15) to a Soviet base where it is relegated to a "comrade" (16) named the Gargoyle. The Gargoyle is a disfigured Soviet scientist who suffered a similar accident to Banner but with radioactivity instead of gamma

rays and, unlike the American scientist who changes appearance sporadically, the Gargoyle is forever stuck as a monster. The trauma is reflected in the Soviet creature's viciousness which scares the other "comrades" from even looking at him. The Gargoyle then travels to the United States after being informed of the Hulk's existence and successfully retrieves him along with Rick, his companion. Back at the Soviet base, the Gargoyle notices Banner's ability to change form and expresses his desire to look human once more. Here we witness another manifestation of American moral superiority in Banner as he offers to help the Gargoyle even though he being held captive. The experiment ends in success and the Gargoyle becomes human once again. Before acknowledging Banner, the rehabilitated Gargoyle faces a portrait of what appears to be a communist figurehead and yells:

It was because of you that I became what I was! Because I worked on your secret bomb tests! But it took an **American** to cure me! And now-- now that I am no longer a Gargoyle, I can **defy** you, and all you stand for, like a **man!** (23).

Immediately after, Banner and Rick are put on a ship headed to the U.S. by the Gargoyle, who detonates a bomb on the base shortly after the launch. As they fly away, Banner hears the blast and exclaims: "It's the end of the Gargoyle! And perhaps... The beginning of the end of the red tyranny, too!" (24).

While the *Fantastic Four* and the *Hulk* saw its main characters inherently invested in the wellness of others, things turned out a little different with Marvel's third character. Spider-Man debuted in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (August 1962), the last issue of that particular title before cancellation. It was the first time Jack Kirby did not join Stan Lee in manning a new creation.



Fig. 3. Breaking with exceptionalism (Lee and Ditko, *AF* #15, page 8)

the first time Jack Kirby did not join Stan Lee in manning a new creation. Kirby's work overflow meant that another artist would have to pencil the new character and the task was handed to Steve Ditko, another young and "passionately liberal" (extremely liberal, as history would later prove) artist of the Marvel bullpen. The fan mail that poured into the offices after the introductory issue led to the character being brought back as lead of its own title on March 1963.

Spider-Man's story begins with Peter Parker, a young, socially awkward, science major —once more— who lived in New York City with his aunt May and uncle Ben. One day, while attending a demonstration on radioactive rays, a tiny spider that had absorbed radiation during the experiment bit Parker and triggered a transformation. Now, what made Spider-Man different from the previous two heroes is that Parker did not assume any charitable role after obtaining his powers (see Figure 3). Quite the opposite. Parker's first instinct is to sell his abilities and gain from the Spider-Man persona. Here we have the first major character that openly decided not

to follow Kennedy's "ask not" calling and turned his back on his patriotic duty as an American citizen.

But like the hubris of a Greek tragedy, Parker's break from the expected norm did not come without consequence. After a for-profit appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, a cop asks him to detain a burglar but Parker lets him go understanding that it is not his business to intervene in police affairs. Furthermore, he tells to the cop that the main reason for him not helping is because "I just look out for number one --that means--**me!**" (Lee and Ditko 8). A number of days pass and Spider-Man's fame ascends with each show he performs on. One night, he arrives at his home to find it ridden with police who inform him that his uncle had been murdered by a burglar who broke in. For the first time in history, Spider-Man swings his web to fight a criminal and, once he manages to catch the perpetrator, he recognizes that it was the same robber he let go after *The Ed Sullivan Show*. The story ends with the words that have become synonymous with the character for more than four decades: "And a lean, silent figure slowly fades into the darkness, aware at last that in this world, with great power there must also come --great responsibility!" (11). Parker's experience then becomes a cautionary tale of what could happen if someone chose the wrong path over the correct one, which, in this case, is analogous with the "American way." The responsibility of power, as assumed by the American exceptionalism construct, is not optional and cannot be ignored. It is an innate quality of the American subject that must be embraced in order to reap the benefits of life— or else.

## **SOCIAL ISSUES**

Perhaps the most talked about innovation in Lee and Kirby's new heroes was that they were more "human" than "super." Lee took his wife's words by heart in that the new heroes should be how he wanted them to be even if it meant questioning the status quo of the Golden Age superhero. Up until 1961, superheroes were perfect, god-like beings who had no struggles but the ones their enemies presented them. The new Marvel group of heroes (and villains) showed frustrations and anxieties any ordinary individual could relate to. Lee even had initially opted out of using traditional superhero costumes or secret identities: "If I had a superpower, there's no way I would wear a mask and not want people to know who I was. I'd want everybody to know!" (Douglas, et. al.). This particular brand of individualism shared its roots with contemporary political and intellectual currents of the United States as well. Ever since the previous wars, U.S. propaganda strategies had focused on emphasizing western individualism over communist collectivism, but the efforts ended up being more statist than individualistic in practice. Citizens were expected to fall into a larger narrative for the good of the nation or face consequences. As Cotten Seiler pointed out in "Statist Means to Individualist Ends," the end result of the United States' propaganda effort did not differ from Soviet Russia's effort in retrospect: "Like the Soviet 'New Man,' the American subject was free to act and to choose, but only 'within the limits circumscribed by the regime'" (9). And so, those who wished to reconfigure the collectivist tendency that had propagated among U.S. citizens raised an alarm to address what William Graebner referred to as the "new fear," which

stemmed from the idea that “modern Americans—as well as Germans and Russians—had somehow fashioned for themselves a straitjacket of institutions and values that contained and thwarted the most basic desires for freedom of action and freedom of will” (qtd. in Seiler 6). In the comics world, the Golden Age hero had been used for propagandistic purposes since the Second World War. Afterwards, with the implementation of the Comics Code Authority, they then turned into the idealization of the American subject and propagated a collectivist narrative. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby joined the ranks of “visual artists, filmmakers, writers, and musicians ... [that] took up the task of extricating themselves and their audiences from this straitjacket” (6) until some extent. The new mentality was noticed and quickly accepted by the audience. The emotion it brought added a dimension to the narrative that allowed the readers to identify with more than just the moral stance of superheroes for the first time. In addition, having super powers did not reciprocate a perfect, carefree life anymore: “Until 1961, no comic writer would have suggested that acquiring strange powers might drive a wedge between a man and his society, bringing him more misery than contentment” (Jacobs and Jones 50). The perception of those who thought or acted outside the norm began to change. Since superheroes showed that each person could be different, everyone who ever felt that they did not “fit in” could finally see that they were not alone (as long as they would still meet certain criteria of gender and race).

The first hero to show a sign of dissatisfaction with their new “calling” was Fantastic Four’s The Thing. Ben Grimm was the only member of the

group who suffered a physical transformation that left him disfigured: “Well! Maybe They’re right! Maybe I **am** a monster! I **look** like one —and sometimes I **feel** like one!” (Lee and Kirby, *FF* #2 5). He often channeled his frustration through rage, threatening anything or anyone that stood in his way. This led to many clashes with Johnny Storm, who also showed a disregard for authority. On another occasion, Reed Richards, angered with their constant bickering, asked Grimm “Why can’t you control yourself, Thing? Why must we always fight among ourselves? What’s **wrong** with us?” To which Grimm replied: “All I gotta do is look in the mirror to answer **that**, brother!!” (Lee and Kirby, *FF* #3 16). Richards would eventually feel responsible for The Thing’s situation and take it upon himself to find a cure. But Grimm’s hopes to be “normal” again would come and go as the attempts to restore his old appearance failed one by one. That, and the random transformations he would sustain during various missions due to radioactive or supernatural reasons saw him grow angrier and more frustrated in each issue. Grimm would eventually find love in the blind daughter of one of their enemies, the Puppet Master. She accepted him because even though she was visually impaired, she could still *see* what really mattered: the kindness of the heart. The Thing’s power, his responsibility, was there to stay indefinitely.

Some villains also benefited from the individualist spin. After success with The Thing, Stan Lee proved his theory that personal flaws mattered in the narrative: “For a long time I’d been aware of the fact that people were more likely to favor someone who was less than perfect —someone with feet of clay with whom they could identify” (*Origins* 60). He proceeded to explore a

villain's *raison d'être* for the audience to try and understand where they were coming from. The first enemy the Fantastic Four ever encountered, the Moleman, had its roots founded on social exclusion. His origin story in *Fantastic Four* #1 begins with a series of rejections from women and job administrators because of his physical appearance: "I **know** you're qualified, but you can't work here! You'd scare our other employees away!" (Lee and Kirby 22). Then, after reaching his limit, the Moleman sealed his exclusion by physically removing himself from society and going to live underground: "Even this loneliness is better than the cruelty of my fellow men!" (22). These backstory panels were meant to cause sympathy for the character who, unlike any other evil mastermind, did not intend to do wrong until he was pushed to do so by "good" people. The same goes for the Fantastic Four's most recurrent antagonist during the first phase of the Marvel revolution: Namor, the sub-mariner. The character, which had originally been introduced in the late 1930s, was given a new life in the atomic era of the Silver Age. An amnesiac Namor was found by the Human Torch in issue #4 (May 1962) and afterwards managed to regain his memory by making contact with the ocean. Once underwater, Namor also remembered his home's whereabouts and swam there only to find it "Destroyed!! It's all destroyed!!" (Lee and Kirby 13). A glow in the water indicated that the destruction was done by radioactive weaponry and that the perpetrators were the "**humans** did it, unthinkingly, with their accursed atomic tests!" (13). Thus began Namor's somewhat justified journey to avenge his people from the actions of the surface dwellers.



Additionally, Lee and Kirby wrote their characters into other types of predicaments that did not just deal with internal emotions. In *Fantastic Four* #9 (December 1962), the heroes were forced to move out of their headquarters and split up due to bankruptcy. The reason given was that Mr. Fantastic had used up all of the team's money to buy stocks and then the market crashed, resulting in the loss of all of the invested capital. The idea for this was taken from the real-life market decline that occurred in December 1961, but that is commonly referred to as the "Kennedy Slide of 1962" or the "Flat Crash of 1962." Even though the crash hit in late 1961, the wave of uncertainty that came with it lasted until June 1962 and that is why it is known by the latter year. Lee and Kirby took advantage of the situation to reference the status quo of the Golden Age hero that was no more and, at the same time, cement the Marvel era of comics in a line given to Mr. Fantastic: "If only we could be like the super heroes in some of these comic magazines, Sue! **They** never seem to worry about money! Life is a **breeze** for them!" (4).

Another hero that often worried about economic hardships was Spider-Man. After learning his lesson in responsibility, Peter Parker tried to make amends by fighting evildoers, but this did not offer him economic stability. So, in the *The Amazing Spider-Man* #1 (March 1963), Parker drops by the Fantastic Four's headquarters to show his abilities and ask for a job as a member. To his surprise, The Invisible Girl tells him that they are a non-profit organization as Richards expands on the matter by stating: "We pay **no** salaries or bonuses! Any profit we make goes into scientific research!" (Lee

and Ditko 21). A disappointed Spider-Man leaves mid-conversation and jumps out the window after the sudden realization that being a hero did not pay.

### **FEMALE REPRESENTATION**

Not everything that came with the Marvel “boom” was forward-thinking in nature. Other not-so-positive and backward elements from the context also made their way in the new batch of heroes. It is here that we witness how Derrida’s “inhabiting” of social structures can also include bad elements from a language-user’s context. The story of Spider-Man is indicative that even though Lee and Kirby (and Ditko) were able to extricate their new heroes from the straitjacket of certain cultural practices, they were still not able to escape from the larger mental institution.

Earlier we mentioned that by the end of the Second World War, a movement had begun to confine women to the spaces men thought better suited them. This mentality or idea, as you wish to call it, is referred to as the “post-war masculine anxiety,” which came from a growing concern that masculinity was being threatened in the U.S. Cold War atmosphere. Cotten Sailer continued to trace the revival of western individualism during the Cold War and noticed that both concepts —the reclamation of the individual self and masculine anxiety— intersected in their execution:

The resurrection of the autonomous self, to which so many mid-century social critics directed their energies, seemed inseparable from the affirmation of masculinity; what Guy Oakes has called “the creation of a new civic ethic tailored to the requirements of the Cold War” was tantamount to encouraging traits diametrically opposed to the feminine (7).

Thus the rediscovery of individualism in the U.S. became associated with the lessening of women's role in both public and private spaces. In addition, the Marvel revolution carried over ghosts from comics' history immediate past that facilitated the suppression of the female gender. The Wertham crusade and subsequent Comics Code Authority were still in effect and justified the act under the pretense of morality. Thomas C. Donaldson's essay "Ineffectual Lass Among the Legions of Superheroes: The Marginalization and Domestication of Female Superheroes, 1955-1970" summarizes the events that led up to the manifestation of masculine anxiety in comics and analyzes how the authors (creators) worked to uphold it:

... it was no longer acceptable for creators to suggest feminine inferiority by simply keeping female characters as a numeric minority. Creators could no longer show women as decisive and able, as people who could act for the public good independently of male assistance... (Chambliss and Svitavsky 140).

Almost a decade after, the "liberal" comic creators at Marvel did not try to change this particular portion of the status quo. They reinforced sexist notions by rehashing the "usual formula" of female-character tropes (146). Women were depicted as weak, superficial, and never amounted to much when members a group. Their powers never compared to their male counterparts even if they were similar and, more often than not, they would faint from the strain of battle (145).

The most commonly used character when referencing masculine anxiety in the Marvel Silver Age is the Invisible Girl herself, Sue Storm. Not only can her superhero name be used as an ironic analogy for the invisibility of women during the time, but her character construction and performance



Fig. 4. A Weaker Demeanor (Lee and Kirby, *FF* #1, cover page)

throughout the *Fantastic Four* series reflect every stereotypical trope conceivable to man.

In the cover of *Fantastic Four* #1, the group is introduced for the first time being attacked by a monster from Moleman's underworld. While the three male characters are depicted in heroic positions and making witty remarks about how they plan to defeat the creature, the Invisible Girl appears trapped in the clutches of the beast bringing up her vulnerability: "I-- I can't turn invisible **fast** enough! How can we stop this creature, Torch?" To which the Human Torch replies: "Just wait and see, sister! The Fantastic Four have only **begun** to fight!" (Lee and Kirby). The Torch's answer sets a pattern for the series in the sense that a distance is established between the "girl" and the "group." When he says that the group has barely begun to fight, he actually

means that the *boys* have barely begun to fight. This distancing creates and ambiguity of Sue's role within the group that is constantly present in different forms all through the series. Is she an actual contributing member or is she in the group because she is in a relationship with the leader, Reed Richards? The cover of *Fantastic Four* #5 (July 1962) paints a similar situation: a large Doctor Doom is seen holding the male members of the group hostage in a chamber while Sue looks on from another room. They all appear in charging motions despite the fact that the air is being drained out of the chamber and, once again, the Invisible Girl is helpless to do anything: "I must get in to save them! But how? **How??**" (Lee and Kirby). The contrast between her and her male counterparts who always appear on the offensive no matter what the odds are implies her weaker demeanor. The reader can then assume that her role is not as decisive or central as the rest.

Within the pages of the comics, among the storytelling, things did not fair better for Sue. The *Fantastic Four* #3 (March 1962) issue saw her expanding her functions to other things that did not include being a crime fighter. Stan Lee has been quoted often as saying that he did not want the new creations to wear any type of uniforms, but pressure from the readers and the editor made him cave eventually. So, as a way to weave the new uniforms into the story, the creators used the Invisible Girl to present the idea to the readers. This gave them an excuse to portray the scene in a most superficial way: by having the Invisible Girl design the suits because "It's time we **all** had colorful costumes!" (Lee and Kirby 7). Sue's body language, expression, and the focus of the panels show an enthusiasm for fashion that she was never given when in

the field of battle. Moreover, the answer she gives Reed Richards after he compliments her on the design creates more confusion as to what her actual functions in the group are:

Richards: Say! This isn't half bad, Sue! Ever think of working for **Dior?**

Invisible Girl: I've got **enough** to do acting as a nursemaid to you three! (7)

In terms of character construction, both the scene and dialogue associate Sue to the spaces related to the home. The purpose behind them, according to Donaldson, is to suggest that, while women may not be suitable for crime fighting, they are quite capable in the domestic duties (Chambliss and Svitavsky 149).

Love or the desire to marry was a large part of the domestication of women in comics. Even though Sue was, for all intents and purposes, Reed Richards' girlfriend, her "femininity" caused her to doubt their relationship upon meeting Namor. Sue was the only character to sympathize with the underwater prince after his home was destroyed and, after being offered to be his queen, apparently felt something more than sympathy. In *Fantastic Four* #6 (September 1962), the Human Torch finds a glossy portrait of Namor between the pages of one of the Invisible Girl's books and burns it. The struggle between the two siblings attracts the rest of the group who learn of the photo and proceed to question her: "Bah! I knew it! All a gal wants is a good-looking guy! It doesn't matter if he's the most dangerous creep on earth!" (Lee and Kirby 12). A helpless and confused, Sue is left without knowing what to say because she is even incapable of explaining what she

feels. Not only was her role in the group being questioned, but her overall judgment and capacity were put on the line due to her gender.

Every instant on the ambiguity of the Invisible Girl's role came full circle in *Fantastic Four* #11 (February 1963) as the group was answering fan mail that was sent into their headquarters. It can be assumed that the story was written as a way for the writers to answer their own correspondence through the characters themselves; a fun way of making readers feel closer to their heroes. After a retelling of the origin story by Richards, an emotional Sue acknowledges her insufficiency in certain events from the group's history: "But they were **your** adventures— the three of you-- much more than **mine!**" (Lee and Kirby 9). A preoccupied Richards asks Sue about the motive of her outburst and she answers that, while the fan mail for the male members had been mostly positive, hers had mostly been about doubting her lack of action in the group: "**There!** A number of readers have said that I don't contribute enough to you ... You'd be-- better off **without** me! And perhaps they're right!" (9). What ensues is probably one of the worst well-intended defenses in history. Richards and a human Ben Grimm (they had tried a new cure a few pages prior), furious about the nature of Sue's letters, decide to "set the record straight" and explain to the readers once and for all exactly what her role is... by equating her to Abraham Lincoln's mother: "Lincoln's mother was the most important person in the world to him! **But--** she didn't help him fight the Civil War! She didn't split rails for him! She didn't battle with his enemies!" (10). Right after this panel, Grimm turns back into The Thing and his frustrations return. The Invisible Girl then feels bad for Grimm and

apologizes for taking time from the things that actually mattered— meaning him: “I realize what a fool I’ve been. Indulging in self-pity when I **should** be trying to comfort **you!** (11). This last turn of events shows the creator’s utter disregard for the matter. If the subject was brought up in the comic book it meant that readers were actually noticing the lack of writing effort in her character. But by giving the preoccupation to the character of Sue, they were able to dismiss it as another petty and superficial worry that an “emotional female” would bring up. The disparaging of women would continue all throughout the Silver Age and we will further discuss how it developed in the other phases.

### *1.5. A Couple of Late Entries*

As the first phase of the Marvel came to a close, two superhero teams were introduced: the Avengers and the X-Men. Even though they both debuted in September 1963, the amount of issues published by the end of the first phase (two each) are not enough to make a thorough dissection. The following summaries of these titles are meant to inform you of the origins of its characters as they will be integrated into the analysis from the second phase onwards.

At first glance, the Avengers were nothing more than a supergroup containing characters from the Marvel roster that were not featured in their own titles: the Hulk (main title book cancelled in March 1963), Ant-Man and Wasp, Thor, and Iron Man. Like the Hulk, whom we have already discussed, these other heroes debuted during the first phase of the Marvel revolution and



share their origins with the exceptionalism and scientific ventures of the era. Dr. Henry “Hank” Pym, the Ant-Man, debuted in *Tales to Astonish* #27 (January 1962) as a scientist who was shunned for dedicating his research to “ridiculous theories” instead of sticking to “practical projects” (Lee, et. al. 2). He then invents a shrinking formula that allows him to become the size of an ant—hence the name—, but it would not be until *Tales of Astonish* #35 (September 1962) that he, along with his wife the Wasp, would debut their superhero personas. Meanwhile, on another magazine titled *Journey into Mystery*, the Norse god of thunder was summoned into modernity. First appearing in issue #83 (August 1962), Dr. Don Blake was an American doctor vacationing in Norway who suddenly found himself running from alien invaders. While taking refuge in a cave where “no human has set foot ... in ages!!” (Lieber and Kirby 4), he finds a wooden stick that turns him into Thor when wielded. Finally, in *Tales of Suspense*, Anthony “Tony” Stark, the Iron Man, made his first appearance in issue #39 (March 1963) as a weapons inventor hired by the U.S. government to help with the “problem in Vietnam” (Lee, et. al. 2). During a visit to South Vietnam, Stark was abducted by members of a “red guerrilla” (4) and was forced to manufacture a weapon for them. Instead, he built an iron suit that granted him special abilities and was able to escape, initiating a road that led to superhero-dom.

The main purpose of the Avengers was equivalent to what would have happened if the gods of Mount Olympus also doubled as a police force. Their first two issues (September and November 1963) saw the group’s formation and also reflected a common worry of the Cold War mentality: fear for the

unpredictability of nuclear weapons or, in this case, the Hulk. In *Origins of Marvel Comics*, Stan Lee discussed how the main inspiration for the Hulk was another well-known literary character that embodied the unknown capabilities of new technologies:

I've always had a soft spot for the Frankenstein monster. No one could ever convince me that he was the bad guy, the villain, or the menace ... He never wanted to hurt anyone; he merely groped his tortuous way through a second life trying to defend himself... (60).

And just as the Frankenstein monster came to symbolize the fears of the people towards the achievements of modernity brought by the Industrial Revolution, the Hulk had come to represent the fear of nuclear exploitations brought by the atomic age.

To say that the Hulk was ever a formal member of the Avengers would be deceiving because of what actually transpired. The Hulk's volatile nature did not let him last one single issue as an Avenger. The first couple of stories mostly involve the group trying to control him along with the U.S. army and failing miserably. Future stories would see him teaming up with various antagonists, proving that a weapon is only as bad (or good) as the person who wields it.

In a completely different style from the Avengers, the X-Men were a group of teenage "mutants" (people that acquire powers or abilities due to a mutation in their genes) who just wanted to live a normal life. Their leader, Professor X, is a mutant with mental powers dedicated to the discovery and training of others with special abilities. Part of his mission is also to protect mutants from the discrimination they would endure should their powers

appear in the public eye. Although the initial issues of the *X-Men* are very different from what they are known for today, one topic that has always lingered in the book is the theme of inequality. In the first couple of issues, the villain known as Magneto (also a mutant) stresses on various occasions that his mission is to prove that the age of the homo sapiens has come to end and that they, the mutants or “homo superior,” are the future of mankind. This battle of races would become a metaphor for the real-life struggle between races in the United States. This part of U.S. history will be further explored in the next phase while the X-Men metaphor for racial issues will be explored in the second chapter.

### *1.6. Phase Two: 1964-1966*

By the end of 1963, the air in the United States began changing its density. The innocence of exceptionalism was fading and in its place came themes of inequality and misrepresentation that questioned the notions of the American subject. The change was due to various accumulating and other unexpected factors. Most notably, president Kennedy was assassinated on November 23, 1963 in Dallas, Texas. A few hours later, vice-president Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in as the new commander-in-chief and ushered in a new, darker chapter of U.S. history. Nobody knew at the time that the bulletins of Kennedy’s passing could have been interpreted as an omen of the things to come in the following years.

In the United States, the Civil Rights movement had become known for carrying out nonviolent protests and acts of civil disobedience with the

purpose of establishing dialogue with government authorities. That changed once inner-city riots (such as the Harlem and Watts riots, 1964 and 1965, respectively) began sprouting across the nation, making the path towards attaining equal rights for African-Americans steeper. For the most part, many unsuspecting citizens were made aware of the injustice people of color faced on a daily basis and an argument arose on whether the government should intervene in private matters or not. The Civil Rights Act of July 2, 1964 saw the government taking action by making it illegal to discriminate based on gender, race, sex, religion or nationality, but the enforcement of said Act lacked and evidenced how the Civil Rights movement's purpose was far from over. Another victory would come the following year with the Voting Rights Act of August 6, 1965, which was intended to protect the voting rights of minority groups. These advances kept fueling the movement which sustained more highs (and some lows) until the early 1970s.

In addition to the presidential changes and Civil Rights movement, the global theater witnessed the escalation of the Vietnam war. The conflict came about after years of struggle between communist China-backed North Vietnam and U.S.-supported South Vietnam. Worried about losing countries to the threat of communism, the United States assisted South Vietnam through "training and advising of a national army" (Chen 241) as early as 1954 to prevent it from falling to "red" militants. But while his predecessors had kept a low profile in the matter, president Johnson committed openly to the Vietnam struggle through a joint war effort in December 1963; a month after assuming office. The escalation was met with staunch opposition from many

sectors: students, artists, clergymen, and private organizations were some of the groups that protested the United States' involvement in the region. Among them, college students stood out due to the amount of campus protests and the defiance of the selective service through draft burnings or evasion. The public opinion was divided among those who agreed with the cause and those that felt that dodging the military draft was un-patriotic or even defied the values of their nation. Regardless of the anti-war efforts, the nation's involvement in Vietnam would drag on until 1973 and become the most-known military failure in United States' history.

The Marvel bullpen reacted to its context by incorporating elements of immediate events into the plots of the comics, but philosophical differences between the writers and the audience resulted in an ideological "halfway" where both agreed on some of the issues, but not others. Whereas the "liberal" factor at Marvel made them staunch supporters of race integration, it seems that the personal experiences of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby as World War II veterans presented a problem with the anti-war sentiment. In *Son of Origins of Marvel Comics* (1975), Stan Lee addressed the depiction of Vietnam war elements and recognized that the comics during this second phase (late 1963-onward) were written "at a time when most of us genuinely felt that the conflict in that tortured land really was a simple matter of good versus evil," but he also reminded everyone that "Since that time, of course, we've all grown up a bit, we've realized that life isn't quite so simple, and we've been trying to extricate ourselves from the tragic entanglement of Indochina" (45). Regardless of the bullpen's personal beliefs, since many of the anti-war

protesters were college students who also read the comics, war messages were never as clear as those in favor of race integration. Vietnam was often portrayed in allegorical scenarios without any compromising commentary while it was very common to see our heroes disagreeing openly with any narrative that purported the superiority of one race over others. Author Sean Howe called this scheme a “middle-of-the-road” liberalism on behalf of Stan Lee where “He’d happily preach tolerance, but he was not going to be caught taking an unpopular stance” (93).

#### **DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS**

A month after Kennedy’s death, on December 20, 1963, president Johnson commenced escalation by authorizing covert operations in North Vietnam that included encouraging an underground resistance and sabotaging key locations (OPPLAN 34A). The reason behind the gradual process was a diplomatic *impasse* in which China had threatened to “enter the war on Hanoi’s side if the United States carried the war too far” (Garver 77). This meant that as long as the United States did not break the established terms, there would be no diplomatic or military retaliation from China. But in August 2, 1964, the United States was handed the opportunity they were looking for. According to reports, an American warship named USS Maddox was attacked by North Vietnamese boats and prompted president Johnson to enact the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution eight days later, on August 10, 1964. The Resolution granted the United States power to attack the region through “conventional” means. Upon passing, Chinese and U.S. ambassadors quickly scrambled to redraw the terms of the conflict:

As US bombing of north Vietnam escalated in 1965-66, the Chinese and US Ambassadors to Poland discussed the Vietnam situation ... At those talks US representatives assured China that American aims were limited to compelling Hanoi to forgo the conquest of South Vietnam and did not seek the destruction of the north Vietnamese regime. ... by November 1965 the two sides had reached a tacit understanding that, as long as US forces did not invade North Vietnam or attack China, China would not enter the war (Garver 78).

Thus we see that the Vietnam conflict was an overly-complicated dispute in which not only was military strategy a key factor, but that the legal and diplomatic tactics were just as important.

The support or, rather, the benefit of doubt, that the Marvel bullpen gave the war can be perceived in a number of situations that were analogous to the Vietnam conflict's legal and military aspects. For instance, in *Fantastic Four* #30 (September 1964), the team faces Diablo, an ancient alchemist who had been sealed in a cave many years ago and was released by a hypnotized Thing. Everyone who comes into contact with Diablo is magically persuaded into working for him and, after a short while, he begins to build an army in South America out of the overabundance of followers. Yet, in a diplomatic twist of the superhero narrative, the team cannot act upon Diablo due to a lack of actual laws being broken:

Baron Hugo: At this very moment he is hiring a private **army**-- to be used at a future date when he decides to **strike!** And with The **Thing** to lead them, the world will be his!

Reed Richards: And yet, we can't attack until he breaks some law!!

Invisible Girl: This is **terrible!** We're all so-- helpless! (10)

Diablo's transgression so far was exerting his influence over others in a similar fashion as the communists who purported their ideology in other countries. It was not until he finally committed a criminal offense that he

could not be intervened. Furthermore, in *The Avengers* #25 (February 1966), Doctor Doom lures the Avengers to the country of Latveria, the land he rules as monarch. Once the team arrives, Doom uses propaganda to turn the citizens of Latveria against them: “It is **unbelievable!** He’s the most notorious villain of modern times ... and yet, he has managed to arouse **blind loyalty** on the part of his **people!** (Lee and Heck 10). Meanwhile, on U.S. soil, the Fantastic Four learn of the Avengers’ troubles and quickly rush to help their friends. Before blasting off, Reed Richards checks their flight clearance status with Washington only to find out that it has been denied. The Fantastic Four then travel to the nation’s capital and are received by a U.S. government official who informs them of the negative implications their trip could have:

U.S. Official: This is a very delicate **international** matter, Mr. Richards! Dr. Doom is Head of State of a friendly nation! We cannot allow private citizens to precipitate a diplomatic **crisis!**

Reed Richards: Then, the **Avengers** are on their **own!** No one can **help** them! (16)

The reason for not letting the Fantastic Four help the Avengers was due to diplomatic relations between the two countries being on good terms despite the fact that the U.S. was aware that Doctor Doom was a despot. Like the U.S. with China, the global theater does not always reflect the real tensions between two powers who may use masks to appease the international community. On a curious note, this was the third time that an American subject was portrayed as abiding (almost religiously) by international laws with no possibility of foul play. This could be interpreted as a extension of American exceptionalism during times of war.



The depictions and analogies with the Vietnam conflict also went beyond international laws or their implications. On another *Fantastic Four* story found in issue #33 (December 1964), the team is informed of a civil war that has broken out in Namor's underwater kingdom. Just as with Vietnam, the question at hand is whether they should intervene or let both sides handle their business. The options are bounced around until the Fantastic Four learn that the leader of the rebellion, Attuma, would attack the surface world should he be victorious: "But it's **not** just him! If Attuma triumphs, **nothing** will stop him! He'll attack your surface world next!" (Lee and Kirby 6). The logic behind the Vietnam intervention came in part by the belief that the communist threat ("red menace") would reach the United States should they be victorious in other territories. Thus the reason to help is based on the possibility of how it could affect *them* in the long run instead of a selfless moral conviction. The Fantastic Four agree unanimously to help and succeed in securing Namor's underwater kingdom without the underwater prince even noticing.

Yet another form in which the bullpen's ambiguity can be perceived was in the depiction of communists-controlled states. The story in *The Avengers* #18 (July 1965) takes the team into the "communist-ruled puppet state of **Sin-Cong—!**" (Lee and Heck 5), a clear metaphor for Vietnam and a play on words of Viet Cong, where two ruthless military leaders overcharge taxes and abuse physically of its citizens. During a display of might in which the "commissar" shows his people how he will guard them from the "accursed imperialists," a local farmer speaks out and reminds them that "... we do not fear the capitalists! They had been our **friends--** They helped **feed** us, helped

clothe us, until **you** came to power!” (6) only to be silenced through violence. The “red” rulers lure the Avengers by feigning to be an underground resistance and capture them upon arrival. Once detained, the commissar and his second-in-command challenge the Avengers to a public duel so their people can witness “...how weak and inferior you capitalists really are!” (15). The plot builds up to the climax where it is revealed that the commissar himself was a robotic puppet controlled by the second-in-command. The story’s propagandistic aim uses heavily-charged language when referring to Americans as a way to rouse sympathy for the war. The ruthless acts of the communist leaders do the same but towards building a case for military intervention. The underlying message was that the U.S. needed to free those civilians from their tyrannic rulers and that they would be grateful for it.

With all the political tensions, it was only natural that the bullpen would “slip” at least once. That time came in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #38 (July 1966) when Peter Parker walked into a student protest and responded by scoffing: “Another student protest! What are they after **this** time?” (Lee and Ditko 10). After it is contemptuously revealed that they are protesting another protest, some students in the mob call for Peter to join them because “...it’s an excuse to cut classes!” and because “...maybe you’ll get your picture in **Newsweek!** (10). The diminishing of the student cause filtered the bullpen’s unpopular stance in the anti-war movement and it did not go unnoticed. Exactly three issues later, in the fan mail section of *Spider-Man* #41 (October 1966), a college student by the name of Bill Fletcher (a representative of George Washington University’s Students for a Democratic Society) called



Fig. 5. Immigrant discrimination (Lee and Kirby, *FF* #21, page 4)

Stan Lee out for having “engaged in an anti-intellectual exercise in name-calling” through the portrayal. He continued to argue about how he understood that fictional characters should not carry ideological banners, but that he rather have them involved discussion-opening scenarios rather than focus on stereotypes. Stan Lee’s only retort came in the form of a “sorry-not-sorry” evasion that included: “We never in a million years thought anyone was gonna take our silly protest-marchers sequence seriously!” and “... we weren’t trying to poke fun at their attire or appearance—not even remotely.” But the real object in question, the portrayal of the ideals behind the protesting, went unmentioned.

### SOCIAL ISSUES

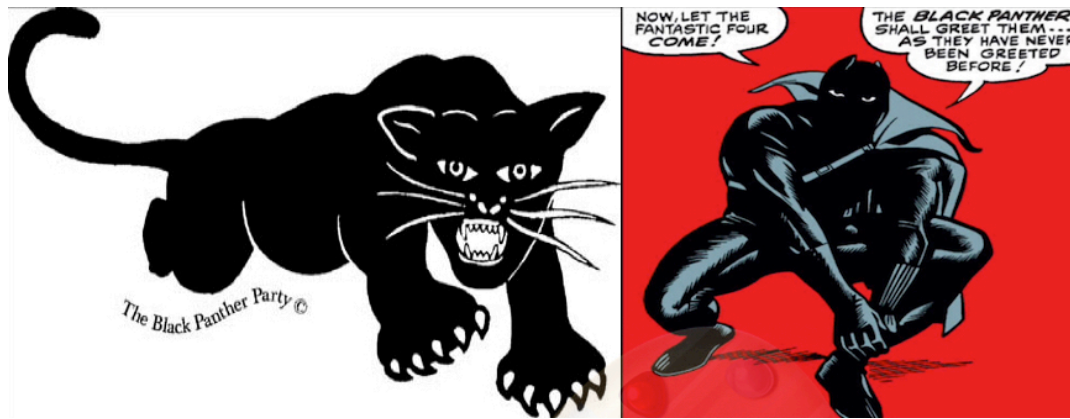
The last *Fantastic Four* issue of the first phase, issue #21 (December 1963), had established the course for the depictions of race in the second phase. The story centers around a Ku Klux Klan-looking villain named the Hate-Monger who, according to Reed Richards, was “... the most dangerous type of menace!” because “He preaches class hatred, race hatred, religious

hatred!” (Lee and Kirby 3). The heroes eventually find themselves face to face with a rally hosted by the Hate-Monger and overhear the crowd chanting “Down with all foreigners! Down with everybody that disagrees with **us!** Hail to the Hate-Monger!” (4). Initially, the group reminds each other that it is the Hate Monger's right to express his opinions or “un-American sentiments,” as someone in the group calls them, but after the mob harasses a foreign-looking citizen (see Figure 5, previous page), The Thing decides to intervene by means of force. The Hate-Monger then uses a ray gun that makes victims “hate” on command and turns the Fantastic Four on each other. The quarrel ends with the group fighting among themselves and breaking up as a result, while an onlooking bystander comments: “Did you see **that!** The Fantastic Four **split up!** They forgot all **about** the Hate-Monger!” (8).

But just as the Hate-Monger’s ray diverted the Fantastic Four’s attention, the plot of the comic then diverts the reader’s attention by straying off to another topic. Nick Fury (another Marvel character who fought in the Second World War alongside Richards) appears in the Baxter building and invites a solitary Mr. Fantastic to help him subdue a revolution in the fictional South American republic of San Gusto. According to Fury’s initial explanation, the motive behind of the revolution is unclear because “...uncle Sammy has been pouring **billions** into San Gusto to make it a showplace of democracy” (10). The analogy with Vietnam is clear. Up until 1963, the United States had only served the region through monetary and strategic help with the hopes that it would turn into a haven for democracy. The Marvel bullpen’s portrayal of the matter reflects a naive perspective in which any

resistance against the United States would be met with confusion because why would anyone want to be on the wrong end of the Cold War? But in good typical comic book fashion, Lee and Kirby were able to tie the Hate-Monger not only to the ills of the U.S. nation, but also to the problems of San Gusto. Once in the fictional republic, the Fantastic Four reunite, learn that the Hate-Monger is behind the revolution (Nick Fury and the C.I.A. already knew, but could not act until they were certain that the Hate-Monger had “messed with Americans”), and succeed in stopping him. Finally, in a strange turn, stranger than what one usually finds in comic books, the Hate-Monger is unmasked and revealed to be Adolf Hitler. The main idea that can be extracted from the events is that the writers believed that both racism and what they perceived as “anti-democracy” were not just un-American, but even comparable to behaviors found in fascism.

After *Fantastic Four* #21, race and war would not be seen in conjunction again. Later plots in the Marvel universe would include elements following the same trend—in favor of race integration, dubious as to the war sentiment—but in separate storylines. The subject of race would return to the *Fantastic Four* in issues #52-54 (July-September 1966) with the introduction of Marvel’s first black superhero: the Black Panther. The hero’s imagery borrowed heavily from the Lowndes County Freedom Organization that emerged in Alabama in 1965 (see figure 6, next page). The purpose of the organization was to give a voice to the African-Americans in the county through voter registration because, even though 80% of the county’s demographic was black, none of them were able to vote. The party’s leader



**Fig. 6.** The LCFO-BPP logo and the character (Lee and Kirby, *FF* #52, page 4)

chose the black panther as their symbol because it “symbolizes the strength and dignity of black people, an animal that never strikes back until he’s back so far into the wall, he’s got nothing to do but spring out” (qtd. in Cronin). A year later, on October 1966, the organization changed its name to the Black Panther Party and became a far-left wing of the Civil Rights movement. This militant ideology contrasted greatly from the peaceful approach that the movement had seen up until that moment and received negative attention from some high-ranking officials such as J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI. But the Marvel character’s debut came months before the LCFO had officially changed their name to the BPP, so a direct correlation between the hero and the party with the same name does not seem probable, but a link between the ideal behind the symbol and the hero is likely due to its prior existence and the cultural awareness of the movement.

The Black Panther, whose alter ego name is T’Challa, hails from a fictional nation in Africa called Wakanda where he also holds the role of chieftain. The people of Wakanda, though tribal in their customs, enjoy extreme wealth and science knowledge beyond imagination. Their capital

comes from a natural resource in the region called vibranium, which they sell for science research and use for the same purpose. The Fantastic Four are immediately won over by the people's intelligence and T'Challa's hospitality and they constantly comment on the subject: "The chieftain of the Wakandas is a wonderful man, Sue, darling! He's as generous as he is powerful... as warmhearted as he is wealthy!" (Lee and Kirby, *FF* #54 7). Furthermore, after T'Challa keeps surprising them with his scientific gadgets, Wyatt Wingfoot, a friend of Johnny Storm's, drops a line that reflects the writer's stance on the matter: "Apparently the talent of **inventive genius** is not limited to any one place, culture, or clime!" (8). The praises may seem corny or brown nosed in retrospect, but one must keep in mind that at the time that this was published, many still believed that the black race was inferior in a number of aspects. These scenes challenged the preconceived notions of the older readers and taught the younger ones to be more inclusive.

Bigotry would appear once more in *The Avengers* issue #32 (September 1966). This time, the perpetrators were a gang called "The Sons of the Serpents" and they would commit acts of violence on the foreigners—all of whom were dark-skinned—that they would target at night. The reason behind the serpent imagery, as the leader explains, is because just "As the **original** serpent drove Adam and Eve from Eden-- so shall **we** drive all **foreigners** from this land!" (Lee and Heck 5). Once more, the writers establish a link between racism and evil by appealing to one of the oldest "good versus evil" stories known to mankind. The "original serpent" in the quote refers to Satan from de Judeo-Christian tradition, and by equating the fallen angel to

the acts of bigotry committed by the Serpents they sent a clear message to the readers as to the nature of racism.

The story also tackles those who stand idle during acts of discrimination. After the first assault carried by the Serpents early in the story, a man who witnesses the beating from his apartment ponders whether he should do something but his wife responds that it is none of their business. The belief that only local authority should handle these situations can somehow be attributed to the larger debate on whether big government (or anyone) had the right to intervene in the racial politics of its citizen's private lives. Even though both the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act had been passed at the moment this issue was released, there was still little information as to the civic responsibility should someone witness an act of discrimination being committed. The wife's sentiment is echoed a few pages later by the Wasp who, after finding out that an immigrant friend of Hank Pym's had also been beaten by the Serpents, asks "...is this really a job for the **Avengers?** Can't the local **police** cope with a few bully boys like the Serpents?" (12). Unsurprisingly, the opinion is not shared by her husband Hank Pym (now going by the superhero name of Goliath) who urges the Avengers to act fast on the matter because "Every second that they [the Serpents] remain free is an **insult** to the men who made this nation great!" (13). The Pym character evokes the U.S. nation's immigrant history to remind readers why defending equal rights should be a patriotic endeavor. This sentiment echoes some comments found in the aforementioned *Fantastic Four* #21 when someone in the group called hate speech "un-American." For



the writers, the fight for the equal rights of African-Americans and minorities was in conformity with the values of the U.S. nation.

But the Serpents could not be confronted in a mere street battle. The Avengers took to a United Nations press conference in order to let their posture be known because “We’re a nation of **laws**-- not mob violence!” (16). It is unknown if this particular comment was directed towards the race riots that had occurred (and would continue to occur) at the time, but it does reflect a growing devotion to the legal system that engrossed Civil Rights and Vietnam war procedures. Since we have already mentioned some of the laws and legal strategies (the LCFO, for example) that granted the Civil Rights movement legitimacy in the eyes of the public, we will now shed some light on the attempts that tried to give the Vietnam war some lawfulness.

The legal devotion of the era would forever be engraved in a new superhero named Daredevil (April 1964) whose alter ego was—drumroll please— a lawyer. Matt Murdock (alter ego name) was just a child when a car accident spilled some chemicals over his eyes and rendered his sight useless. But as a side effect, the same chemicals heightened his other senses to superhuman levels. Daredevil depends on unconventional methods to fight crime and is not hindered by the subjectiveness that can be brought by visual appearances. In this sense, it is difficult not to see a parallel between the new vigilante and the figure of Lady Justice, whose objectiveness is attributed to her inability to see. In addition, Murdock would often legally represent the villains he fought as Daredevil in order to gain a better understanding of the laws being violated or to look for a legal angle from where he could help.

For the most part, Daredevil's stories focused on the presence of organized crime in various parts of society. This also reflected a larger happening in early 1960s U.S. history when Attorney General Robert “Bobby” Kennedy (John F. Kennedy’s brother) mounted a crusade against organized crime. In a September 25, 1963 *Statement to the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Senate Government Operations Committee*, Robert Kennedy reminded others that the fight against “a private government of organized crime, a government with an annual income of billions, resting on a base of human suffering and moral corrosion” (3) was far from over. He then continued to compare how, years prior to him being Attorney General, this style of crime ran rampant and how the situation improved after Congress helped by passing various measures:

In 1961 and 1962, Congress granted us new statutory authority with which to act against the rackets. With bipartisan concern and support, we obtained new laws forbidding interstate travel for racketeering purposes, interstate shipment of gambling machines or paraphernalia, and use of interstate communications for gambling purposes (6).

The innovation of the war against organized crime was the use of new laws (which Kennedy referred to as “legal weapons”) to fight those involved in this type of activity. The same procedures could be applied to corrupted officials who received payoffs for services. Kennedy mentions the apprehension of authority figures such as mayors and police chiefs for accepting bribes “in exchange for approving contracts for city business” (17). These ranged from construction, bowling alleys, real estate, restaurants, and more (17). By 1964, the fight had intensified in heavily-crowded cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York City, where the new superhero’s story took place.

Daredevil's run-in with organized crime came at an early age when his father, an amateur boxer, agreed to fight in fixed matches in order to pay for his son's college tuition. During his last bout, "Battling Murdock" was supposed to take a dive but decided against it because he wanted to make his son proud. As a result, the Fixer (leader of the local mob) had Murdock Sr. killed. This prompted Daredevil to target that particular organization during his first hero outing. But mere violence would not be enough to bring these people to justice. The mob villains in the world of *Daredevil* are aware of the legal implications of vigilantism and threaten to use the law against him: "Mister, whoever you are... you're in a mess of **trouble!** You're not gettin' away with comin' here and roughing us up! We got **laws** to protect innocent people!" (Lee and Everett, *DD* #1 17). By saying "innocent," the Fixer plays coy with Daredevil who has no proof that he gave the order to kill Battling Murdock. It also brings forward another legal concept which is *habeas corpus* (or innocent until proven guilty). Since the mob tends to work behind the scenes, acquiring evidence for incrimination is always a difficult endeavor. Robert Kennedy had mentioned in his *Statement* that the biggest advances against organized crime were possible due to former mob members breaking "the underworld's code of silence" (2). Thus, in accordance with the law, Daredevil is often seen tricking mob bosses into confessing while authority figures overhear, recording them on a miniature recorder hidden in his billy club (Lee and Wood, *DD* #8 5), or transmitting video footage of incriminating actions (*DD* #11 10).

Over at the lawyer side, Matt Murdock was hired by the Fantastic Four to “check” the Baxter building before renewing their lease (Lee and Orlando, *DD* #2 2); represented The Owl, “the most ruthless financial wizard of all time” in issues #3 and #20 before fighting him as Daredevil; was hired by Namor to sue humankind for “depriving [his race] of [their] **birthright!**” (Lee and Wood, *DD* #7 4); and solved a copyright dispute between two scientists (*DD* #8). Each case added a fantasy element that prevented the story from being a mere court scene. But one story in particular found in *Daredevil* #10 (October 1965) stands out for tackling organized crime in the most sacred of places: politics. An evil mastermind named The Organizer commits a series of crimes intended to “discredit and undermine the city government” (Lee and Wood 5). Meanwhile, at Matt Murdock's law firm, his partner Foggy Nelson is running for District Attorney (D.A.) of a political party called the “Reform Party.” The Organizer then targets the Party and begins to terrorize them through kidnappings and extortion. Nelson’s involvement with the targeted political entity allows Murdock insight into their legal documents which stand out for being shadowy at best. In the end, we discover that the Reform Party's leader, Jonas, was The Organizer all along and intended to abuse his political power for criminal gains.

Another hero book that focused on organized crime during this phase was the *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Even though his enemies were more science-fiction in nature (Green Goblin, Electro, Rhino, Vulture, Sandman, etc.), they all began to work in gangster-type groups that alluded to the situations found in the real world. For example, in *Spider-Man* #10 (March

1964), we are introduced to a band of criminals, known as The Enforcers, whose physical appearances and names resemble that of Dick Tracy-like characters: Fancy Dan, The Ox, Montana, and their leader, The Big Man. Both Peter Parker and Spider-Man find themselves involved with The Enforcers when it is revealed that Parker's love interest, Betty Brant, owed money to a loan shark that The Enforcers had taken over: "Lady, when the **Big Man** took over every racket in town...including the loan shark racket, he didn't do it for his **health!** Now, I **warn** you! (Lee and Ditko 7). Brant had taken some money to pay off her brother's debt to the mafia and things turn more complex when Spider-Man is added to the equation. The story concludes in issue #11 (April 1964) with her brother being killed in an altercation with Spider-Man and, as a result, Betty ends up resenting the superhero for his involvement which complicated Peter's relationship with her in the long run.

#### **FEMALE REPRESENTATION**

Concerning the subject of female representation, since we last saw, women were questioned for their "weak" demeanor or inability to contribute to the teams they formed part of. The second phase of the Marvel revolution differed by not caring for criticism and just assumed many stereotypes allotted to their view of women.

To begin, Sue Storm and Reed Richard's relationship finally stabilized after she chose him over Namor in *Fantastic Four* #27 (June 1964). This caused Sue's attention to deviate from crime fighting to wedding preparations over the following issues while the rest of the team kept to their usual matters: "Just like a **girl!** She'd rather waste time with those dull wedding plans than

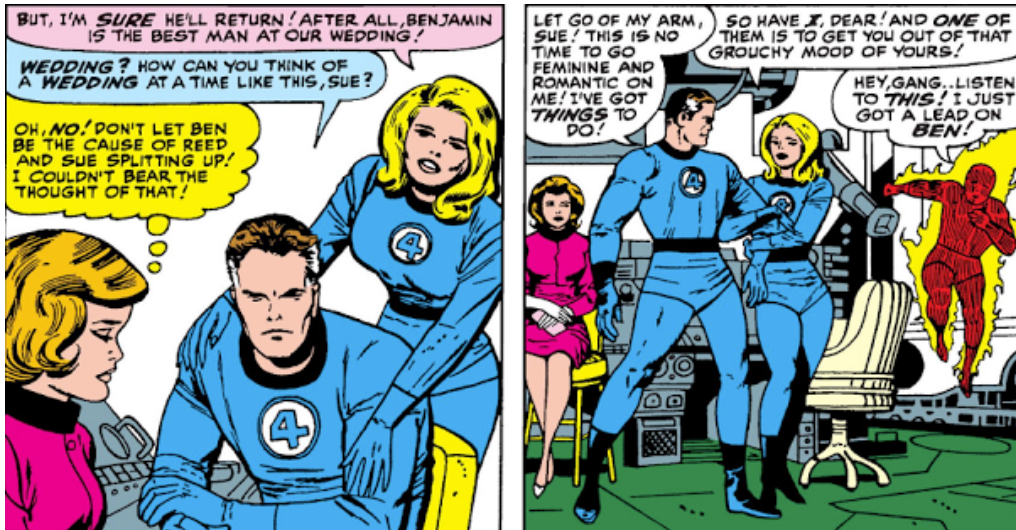


Fig. 7. Irritable Mr. Fantastic (Lee and Kirby, *FF* #41, page 8)

see my new little discovery!” (Lee and Kirby, *FF* #36 6). In a sexist sense, the engagement “activated” Sue’s domestic powers that were better honed than her superpowers without the need of training. In addition, she also became gradually overrun with pettiness while Reed became more and more irritable. In *Fantastic Four* #41 (August 1965), there is a scene (see Figure 7) in which the couple worries about The Thing who stormed out of the building after throwing another tantrum. While Reed’s concern is about his friend’s well-being, Sue’s preoccupation stems from the vacancy Grimm left as best man in their wedding. Reed then reacts to Sue with incredulity over her priorities and she tries to make amends by comforting him. In this moment, Reed bursts with anger: “Let go of my arm, Sue! This is no time to go feminine and romantic on me! I’ve got **things** to do!” (Lee and Kirby 8). The use of the word “feminine” is a key characteristic of the second phase of Marvel comics. It can be seen applied often and in a number of situations connoting weakness, domestic urges, pettiness, or anything else misattributed to women. Moreover, when Reed emphasizes that he has “things” to do, it is meant to contrast against the

Invisible Girl's other role in the group which is that of homemaker or, in that moment, wedding planner.

On another occasion, in issue #43 (October 1965), Sue and Reed scrambled to the Baxter building to begin plotting a counterattack against a group of supervillains who captured The Human Torch and brainwashed The Thing. While Reed works on a new weapon to reverse The Thing's mind control, Sue is overcome with emotion and pesters Reed:

Sue: Reed, why hasn't **Johnny** rejoined us? What if something **happened** to him? He's my own **brother!** I can't bear this fearful waiting!

Sue: Reed, **say** something!

Richards: I **can't**, darling! Not till **this** job is finished! The slightest miscalculation on my part could kill Ben instantly!

Sue: Forgive me, dear! I've no right to distract you this way! (Lee and Kirby 8).

But the most notable change came after Sue and Reed finally tied the knot in the *Fantastic Four Annual* #3 (1965), as they instantly became the stereotypical image of an old married couple. Immediately after the wedding, Sue's hopelessness would transfer from matters belonging to "femininity" to traits attributed to a "wife." In issue #47 (February 1966), the team meets a race of super-powered beings who are being hunted by another shadowy group. As they witness a frog-like creature being abducted, Reed springs into action but is stopped by a hysteric Sue:

Richards: I can't stand by and let you **abduct** him like this--!

Sue: Reed-- be **careful!** We're all **alone** here-- and his guards are all **armed!**

Richards: Stop sounding like a **wife**, Sue! **I** still make the decisions for this team! A man's **life** may be at stake! (Lee and Kirby 7).

Reed reasserts his masculinity while reminding Sue that her unsustainable worries come from the fact that she is a married woman. Whereas the “female” concept brought forward emotions and domestic-centered attributes, the concept of the “wife” overloads the emotions turning them into anxiety and bickering.

The Marvel idea of femininity is such a broad concept that merits its own study. Aside from generalizing a woman’s behavior, it also includes actions men should avoid in order to prevent risking their masculinity. In the same *Fantastic Four* #41 that was mentioned earlier, The Thing’s disappearance causes his girlfriend Alicia to go looking for him at the Baxter building. Upon learning that he left the group for good, she breaks out and starts crying while Sue exclaims: “That’s it, dear! You just have a good cry! I think the **boys** would like to shed a few tears also, if it weren’t so unmanly!” (Lee and Kirby 5). The line may be understood in two different forms: the obvious sexist allusion that crying connotes weakness (and therefore, femininity) or as an ahead-of-its-time commentary where one takes into account the role-playing that is now commonly associated with gender. Along the latter train of thought, Sue’s dialogue implies that if it were not for social beliefs or practices, men would be comfortable with showing their emotions. She also reveals that men share the same worries as women on the inside, but that the main difference lies in how they choose to manifest them. Sadly, the analysis can only be done in hypothetical terms since there are no other instances as ambiguous as this one that support the writers’ progressive thinking.





Fig. 8. A “Feminine” Moment (Lee and Kirby, *FF* #41, page 18)

If experience has taught us anything, it is that when men lead, one is bound to find constant examples of double standards. Still in issue #41, the female member of the Frightful Four is “tempted” (see Figure 8) by an unconscious Mr. Fantastic: “The Thing, Sue Storm, and that juvenile Torch meant **nothing** to me! But Reed Richards... He seems almost too handsome to harm...!” (Lee and Kirby 18). But after thinking about it thoroughly, she reaches the conclusion that “none of us [villains] are safe while **any** of them [Fantastic Four] live! I must not become weak and feminine at a time like this!” (18). The woman is portrayed as having a moment of weakness (or femininity) that she must overcome for the welfare of her group. Prior to this moment, the character had enjoyed a strong character construction that set her apart from other women in the Marvel universe. Thus, the overcoming of her “femininity” is attributed to the advantage she possessed over other women. Yet, when a similar situation is presented to a male character a couple of issues later and he is not able to overcome it, the whole thing is brushed off as something pertaining to manhood. The Frightful Four saga ends in issue #43

(October 1965) with the whole villain group being apprehended except Medusa, the woman who had a soft moment for Richards. Her escape was due to the Human Torch hesitating when he had the chance to subdue her. When Richards inquired about the escape knowing that Torch clearly had the upper hand in the chase, the Torch snapped back with: “So I **goofed** for once! Get of my back, willya!” (Lee and Kirby 19). Immediately after, Mr. Fantastic answers “I think I understand! She’s an extremely **attractive** female!” (19) and leaves it as that. The situation presents the obvious problem of (lack of) understanding due to the writers’ gender being all males. In Medusa’s instance, one feels that her weakness is due to the fact that she is a woman and cannot control her domestic urges, while The Human Torch’s weakness is implied as part of a larger “growing up” phase that every boy goes through. This idea is further supported by Richards’ sudden change in attitude toward Johnny, who began seeing the Torch as an adult and even called him a “man” for the first time shortly after letting Medusa escape.

Other women in the Marvel roster suffered from biased depictions as well. The Avenger’s Wasp was also known for not contributing much to the team and perhaps for being even more superficial than Sue Storm. For example, after a battle against Namor in *Avengers* #4 where the Wasp disappeared midway through, she reappears at the end saying: “I was doing what **any** girl would do in a moment of crisis-- powdering my nose, of course!” (Lee and Kirby 23). In the following story, issue #5 (May 1964), Wasp joins Ant-Man on a research project inside an ant hill and complains that “This place is too dry for my delicate complexion!” (Lee and Kirby 4).

Furthermore, as with Reed and Sue, her relationship with Hank Pym would see its moments of high tension due to her “femininity.” After failing to be of assistance in Pym’s laboratory in issue #32 (September 1966), Pym yells at her about how he rather have a *professional* assistant instead of a *woman*: “And, I’ll **get** one—a top-notch **scientist**— not a chattering **female!**” (Lee and Heck 6). It is unclear here if the use of “female” denotes “weakness” as it had been previously used or if it was given a new sense around the lines of “unknowledgeable” since it was compared to “scientist.” In any case, it serves as yet another example of how Marvel bullpen’s use of the word was very varied and can merit a whole study to it.

The number of forms in which the Marvel second phase continued its depreciation of women is (almost) limitless. Villains repeatedly targeted females for kidnappings because they were easier to handle and, when fighting in groups, male villains would opt out of squaring off with women because they were not considered “fair game” (Lee and Kirby, *FF* #52 18). In other books such as *The Amazing Spider-Man* and the *X-Men*, the male heroes would keep their would-be girlfriends on call or abandon them midway through a date when called for duty. Being taken for granted caused each one of the girls to react negatively —and they all had good reasons to do so— yet their reactions would be portrayed as petty and emotional squabbles from “jealous, foolish female[s]” (Lee and Ditko, *SM* #22 16). As time moved forward and preconceived notions within the United States were being constantly challenged, the dominating view of femininity would only see a modicum of progress nearing the end of the decade.

### *1.7. Phase Three: 1967-1969*

The last three years of the 1960s witnessed the exacerbation of the local and world events that we have followed since the beginning of the decade and, as a consequence, of every counter movement that stemmed from said events as well. The Civil Rights struggle had come to encompass other causes such as feminism, free speech rights, and educational reform, among others. In turn, these causes were all channelled by college students who added their anti-war message to the list and manifested throughout the United States in the form of protests, strikes, campus sit-ins, or riots. The government's support for civil rights, which had been unconditional since John F. Kennedy's administration, was compromised once movement leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. also began to criticize the president's war policies: "In early 1967, when he could no longer stay quiet and publicly attacked the president's Vietnam policy, King too lost whatever remaining influence he had with the Johnson administration" (Lawson and Payne 37). The backlash that came from the highest authority revealed "the sinister side of the federal government's relationship with the civil rights movement" (37) which sought to discredit King Jr. through a joint effort with the FBI. King would have to endure constant persecution for a little over year as his life, much like John F. Kennedy's, was cut short on April 4, 1968 after a gunman entered the motel room he was staying at in Missouri and shot him. Still facing pressure and persecution, the remaining civil rights leaders turned their efforts into the preservation of "the legislative and judicial victories they had obtained and see that they were properly enforced" (39) in order to ensure a lasting

legacy for the movement. Government repression would continue well into the seventies especially among the more militant factions of the civil rights movement such as the Black Panthers.

A factor worth mentioning that occurred during this time that had an immediate effect on the comics of the third phase was the appearance (or resurgence) of a proper feminist movement also known as “women’s liberation.” Feminism had benefited from the larger achievements of the civil rights movement since the beginning of the decade, but it was not until 1967 and afterwards that, with the social awareness momentum of the era, they were able to break out on their own. Their main goal was “not just to redistribute wealth and power in the existing society, but to challenge the private as well as the public, the psychological as well as the economic, the cultural as well as the legal sources of male dominance” (Baxandall and Gordon 4) through social initiatives geared towards reeducating the masses. Like other movements, women’s liberation relied heavily on activism to spread their message and, by the end of the decade, managed to receive widespread public recognition.

#### **DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS**

On another part of the world, the Vietnam conflict continued to spin out of control. In 1967 Washington ignored—for the third time—China’s warnings against directly engaging North Vietnam:

In that year [1967] the United States waged the most unrestricted war against North Vietnam of any year up to 1972. All north Vietnamese air bases were destroyed, forcing North Vietnamese planes to operate out of bases in China ... By late 1967 the buffer along the Sino-

Vietnamese border off-limits to US pilots was pared down to only five kilometers (Garver 83).

China responded by augmenting its presence in North Vietnam, but an actual counterattack was not expected from them. But during the following year, on January 30, 1968, the Viet Cong (North Vietnamese militant faction based in South Vietnam), along with the North Vietnamese military, began an all-out surprise assault known as the Tet offensive. South Vietnamese cities were sieged, embassies were attacked, and authority figures were executed in public spaces:

Sometimes they were reportedly tied up and paraded down the streets before they were killed, or dragged in their homes and beheaded in front of their families ... It was soon rumored among the population that the Viet Cong were looking for, and would arrest or shoot, anyone in uniform or wearing a gun (Pohle 13).

Washington and the South Vietnamese government scrambled to mitigate the damage which already had received a high number of casualties. Even though the blood was spilled in Vietnam soil, the images quickly travelled across the globe and were transmitted through U.S. television sets, further fueling the anti-war outrage. The conflict in Vietnam seemed to be lost and by the end of 1969 not much had changed. The United States was submerged in a quagmire with no clear exit strategy.

With so many political and social happenings, it would seem almost impossible to keep from leaning towards at least one cause. Many would think that the Marvel bullpen's publishings, fronted by Stan Lee's middle-to-left editorial magic, would have stepped up their commentary at this point instead of keeping with their usual formula. But, as comics historian Sean Howe

recalls, the uncertainty depicted in the comics of the third phase “were so ambiguous in their political subtext that Marvel was embraced by both the far left and the far right” (Howe 94). During a radio interview in 1967, Lee defended their decisions of avoiding definitive stances by stating that portraying fictional characters in real-life scenarios would be in bad taste: “We treat these characters sort of tongue-in-cheek and we get a lot of laughs out of them ... I don’t know if it’s in good taste to take something as serious as the situation in Vietnam and put a Character like Captain America” (qtd. in Howe 94). One could easily argue against Lee’s opinion by reminding him that, during World War II, it was common to see heroes such as Captain America or Superman swinging by Nazi Germany and punching SS soldiers. The only difference that could explain Lee’s newfound reasoning could come from his sudden realization that the Vietnam conflict was fundamentally different to previous wars. It was not about the triviality of activists opposing U.S. intervention anymore—there had also been anti-war movements in the U.S. during the previous wars—, it was evident that Vietnam had caught the exceptional American subject on shaky moral ground and it was not good for the American ego. Still, not wanting to “flip-flop” on his initial posture and disaffect readers in the process, Lee made sure that everything published under the Marvel logo kept a centrist approach a while longer.

The Marvel corporate hierarchy also witnessed some changes during these final years. Also in 1967, a new management team came to power at Marvel’s distribution company, Independent News (which also distributed DC comic’s magazines), and along with them came new marketing opportunities.

Marvel was finally allowed to expand their line and, by the first half of 1968, new titles such as *Silver Surfer*, *Captain America*, *Iron Man*, and *The Incredible Hulk* had made their debuts (Howe 89). Since Marvel superheroes were also being featured in Saturday morning cartoons, Stan Lee relegated some of his writing duties to newcomers in order to focus on television production and overall company publicity. Finally, in the summer of 1968, Martin Goodman sold Marvel to the Perfect Film & Chemical Corporation. The deal clearly favored Goodman, his son, and Stan Lee over the rest of the staff by ensuring their positions in the company and it did not go unnoticed (Howe 92). Goodman's legal team noted that Lee was "disappointed" with the fact that the rest of his team was not properly compensated but his opinion on the matter was not enough to ease the tensions within the bullpen following the sale's announcement. By the start of 1970, a more-than-frustrated Jack Kirby would become the company's first casualty. After years of feeling he was being taken from granted, Kirby quit Marvel and signaled the imminent end of the Marvel Silver Age of comics on March 6, 1970 (Howe 108).

Despite there being more produced material than during the previous two phases, a large majority of comics in the third phase did not reflect real-life topics in their fantastic worlds. Instead, a large number of them (those that Lee did not write) were dedicated to pure fiction. It is unclear whether the decision behind the distancing was deliberate or otherwise, but Sean Howe noted that "there was strong criticism [from the readers] when the stories avoided social issues" (93) during these high-strung years. One must also take into consideration the answer Lee gave the radio interviewer about how he had



come to feel about portraying “serious” events in comics. Nevertheless, the themes of the times were still present in more subtle or practical representations. For example, African American presence in comics, something that had distinguished Marvel from other companies since early on, increased as it became common to see black men and women in the background of panels or as active characters. Whether they be new heroes, pedestrians, police officers, students, or Hank Pym’s lab partner (who had previously been attacked by the Serpents in *The Avengers* #32 for being a “foreigner” and was now portrayed as an African American), representation came closer to resembling a realistic experience.

#### **SOCIAL ISSUES**

One of the more exemplary books for inclusion in this phase is the *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Aside from the artists including more African Americans into the daily life of our established characters, they also dabbled into the thoughts and sentiments of late-sixties social tensions among the black community. In issue #51 (August 1967), readers were casually introduced to a black male in the office of Daily Bugle editor J. Jonah Jameson. The story ends with no information of the character ever given other than the one line that he has in the whole book: “Suppose we replace him with **Ned Leeds?**” (Lee and Romita 9). Even though the scene was made to seem as if the character had been a regular in the series, the reality was that it was his first-ever appearance in a Marvel comic. A number of issues later, in issue #54 (November 1967), we see the character again (now with graying hair) and are formally introduced to him. His name is Joe Robertson and he just happened

to have been the city editor of the Daily Bugle the whole time (we are sure the readers would have remembered him from before). His position at the newspaper placed him side-by-side with Jameson who, as most people would agree, gathered all the characteristics of a conservative bigot in the style of Archie Bunker. But here is how the elements from the context worked together to make their relationship work: Robertson served as equilibrium to the otherwise unbalanced opinions of Jameson who, even though was portrayed as an out-of-touch paranoid, was perfectly aware of the times' social struggles and knew that there were boundaries he should not cross.

Though race was not an issue between Robertson and Jameson (thus far), it did present a problem to Robertson's son, Randy. In *The Amazing Spider-Man* issue #68 (January 1969), aptly titled "Crisis on Campus," we see the subjects of student protests and racial tensions intertwined in a single plot. The story centered around a manifestation that broke out at Empire State University (ESU) —Randy Robertson and Peter Parker's school— over affordable student housing. The main protest group was comprised mostly of African American students and Randy Robertson was among them. After encouraging others to pick up signs and join in on the protest, a fellow protester in a blue shirt questions Randy's commitment to the cause by bringing up the fact that his father works for the "establishment": "**Hey! Doesn't Roberson's father work for the Daily Bugle? Who wants the son of an uncle tom marchin' here with us?"** (11). For those who may not follow, "uncle tom" was a derogatory epithet used against African Americans who bent over sideways in order to please their oppressor. Furthermore, during the

civil rights movement, the more militant wings of the movement used it to refer to any form of assimilation,, or cooperation from members of the black community because they saw it as a sign of giving in to their oppressors. Thus, not only was the epithet thrown at Randy charged with the implication that Randy's dad worked for the "man," it also alluded to the fact that he was a black man "bending over" for the whites.

As the tension between the students built up, a riot erupted and, unbeknownst to everyone, the crime lord known as the Kingpin used the protest as a smokescreen to steal a valuable artifact from the university. Randy and the other students take the fall for the robbery and are taken into custody while Joe Robertson (who had arrived at the scene) vowed to have them released. In issue #69 (February 1969), the students were interrogated in a police precinct and maintained their solidarity to the cause while declaring innocence to the robbery. Joe Robertson, disappointed in his son's actions (see Figure 9, next page), confronts Randy who reveals that he used militant activism as a way to distance himself from his father: "You've become part of the **establishment...** the **white man's** establishment! I've gotta live that **down!**" (Lee and Romita 5). Joe then counters by reminding his son that the whole point of the civil rights movement is to prove that they are just as capable or better than the "establishment," and not to impose their own vision of normalcy. The conversation ends as the leader of the protesters thanks Joe for his interest in helping, but expresses that they would rather manage the situation their way and "shake whitey **up** a little!" (5).

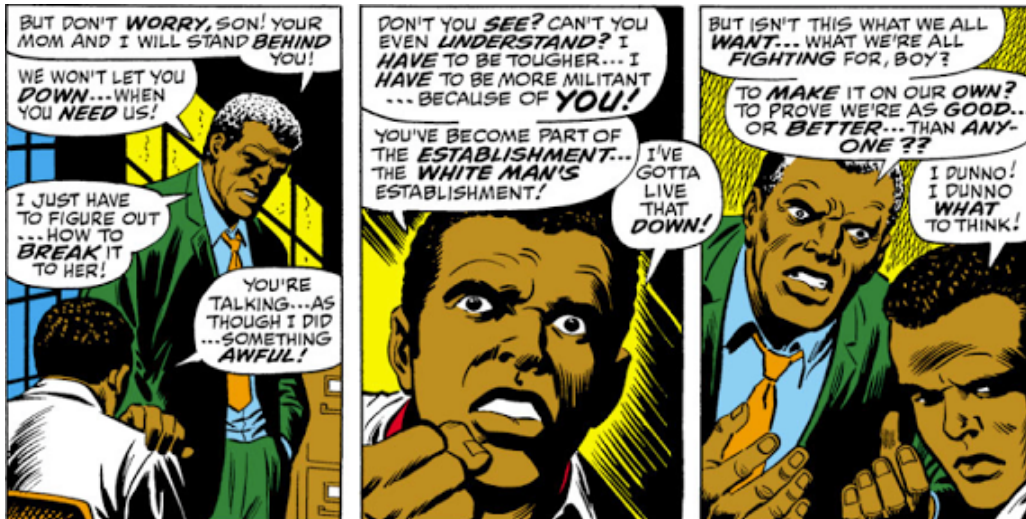


Fig. 9. Sell out (Lee and Romita, TASM #69, page 5)

Randy Robertson's uphill battle against a world dominated by the oppressors made him consider quitting school altogether in issue #73 (June 1969): "But what's the **point** bein' a success in **whitey's** world? Why must we play by **his** rules?" (Lee and Buscema 12). As expected, Joe responded by reaffirming the importance of having an education despite there being a race divide in the world. He also recognized the particular context that they were living in and alluded to the fact that, as a consequence, not everyone would adapt well to the changing environment. As their conversation winded down, an angry J Jonah Jameson (who had been hospitalized for some days) stormed into the room and began to argue with Joe about some editorial decisions he made while Jameson was at the hospital. Randy sees them both engaging in a heated argument and notices that his father was "standing right **up** to him!" (13) by not letting Jameson shout him around. Once the dust settles, Randy asks his father "why should you haveta take all that **bull** from a **racist** like him?" (14), to which his father replies: "just 'cause he's white doesn't make him a **racist**! We'll never get **anywhere** till we recognize who our **real**

enemies are!” (14). It is not clear what Lee meant to say by “real enemies” through Joe’s dialogue, but if his history with moderation serves as an indicative, he could have been referring to extremism as a larger enemy in any part of an argument.

The juxtaposition of moderate versus extremist views was a real battle that was being fought outside the comics world. The militant ideology within the civil rights movement was one of the more definitive reasons why the U.S. government withdrew its support from certain leaders and began persecuting them (Lawson and Payne). Stan Lee’s centrist views took form in the portrayal of a scenario that favored the government’s call to moderation. But as a true master of the middle ground, Lee also stressed —through his writing— the fact that everyone should still be heard and, most importantly, that there were two sides to every argument. After the case about the missing artifact was resolved in issue #70 (March 1969), the Dean of ESU sat down with the activists to inform them that the student housing for which they protested was approved. When asked about his refusal to meet the students before the riot, Dean Corliss admitted that even though he was on the students’ side all along, his stubbornness made him avoid any encounter: “I’m not **blameless** in the matter! I thought students should be **seen** and not **heard!** I realize **now...** how **mistaken** I was!” (Lee and Romita 9). This type of writing in which both factions were granted valid points was a leap from the last portrayal of student protesters when they were depicted as a hollow movement. Dean Corliss’ change in opinion can be said to have been a fictionalized portrayal of Stan Lee’s change in opinion about the war and student protests.

Understanding that there were two sides to every argument was not restricted to high-ranking officials. Before the protest in issue #68 ended in a riot, Peter Parker had ran into the same student protesters and was asked to join in as well. Unlike the previous time when he brushed the whole idea aside, Parker showed interest this time by asking about the movement's purposes. Once he was filled in on the matter, he followed by asking about the Dean's take on the situation. Since the students had not talked to the Dean prior to their manifestation, Parker fled feeling that it was a one-sided argument and said: "**Anyone** can paint a **sign**, mister! **That** doesn't make you **right!**" (Lee and Romita 10). Such events were meant to emphasize the importance of seeking both sides of an argument before reaching a definitive conclusion or taking action. A similar situation was presented in *Captain America* #120 (December 1969), when Steve Rogers (Captain America) walked into a university and witnessed two students harassing a professor while yelling: "We've listened to **you** long enough! Now **you'll** do the listening!" (Lee and Colan 8). Rogers decides to do right by getting the professor out of harm's way, but brings up the students' demands after the professor thanks him for his actions: "But, **tell** me... Have you ever tried **listening** to what they're after?" (8).

Perhaps the most memorable instance of understanding came at the hands of Spider-Man himself in a tale featured in *The Amazing Spider-Man* issues #78 and #79 (November-December 1969). In the story we are presented to a young African American named Hobie Brown who was currently going through a rough patch in life. Even though he was a smart and skilled inventor,

he was stuck at a dead-end job where, according to Brown, they “hired [him] to fill out a **quota!**” (Lee and Buscema, *SM* #78 12). This comment references the policy of “affirmative action” that came into effect during the sixties and that was also known as “positive discrimination.” The policy openly encouraged employers to favor “individuals belonging to groups which suffer discrimination” (Online at *Oxford Dictionaries*) in professional and academic spaces in order to “ensure” equal opportunity. The whole idea was met with opposition from both sides of the aisle: the white majority believed that inequality would not be solved by favoring some groups in particular while minorities felt that it gave a narrow definition of the oppressed (Kahlenberg 3-4). Brown eventually had to quit his job due to pressure from his boss and, feeling that he was left with no other choice, decided to focus his talents on becoming a supervillain named the Prowler. But his tenure in the crime business would be short-lived. Spider-Man succeeds in apprehending the Prowler in issue #79 and, noticing his young age, inquires about his decision to become a villain. A disillusioned Brown responds with: “All I ever wanted was a **chance..** to **use** my talent... to **help** people... but no one **listened...** no one **cared!**” (Lee and Buscema 20). Spider-Man noticed how much of Hobie Brown’s problems and anxieties resembled those of his alter ego Peter Parker and related to the situation. Since no real harm had been done, Spider-Man released Brown saying: “I mean maybe we were **both** in the same boat... **both** of us riding a rocket to nowhere... only you were the **lucky** one... ‘cause you just got **off!** (20). The transcendental message in this scene

being that once people sit down and talk, they immediately stop fighting and begin finding common ground with each other.

As in the second phase, the *Daredevil* book shared a lot of topics in common with *The Amazing Spider-Man*. The theme of activism was presented in issue #44 (September 1968) when Foggy Nelson, who was running again for District Attorney, saw his girlfriend, Debbie Harris, in a televised protest demonstration. Nelson later reprimanded her for the bad attention it could attract his political aspirations to which she answered: “A person has to stand for **something** these days!” (Lee and Colan 17). A couple of panels later, Matt Murdock is dragged into the argument and takes Harris’ side by comparing the civil rights movement to what the U.S. founding fathers did in the 1770s: “I **know** how conservative you are, Foggy-- but remember this-- if **Washington** were alive today, we’d call **him** a **protester!**” (18). Matt’s comment aligns with previous instances where Stan Lee had compared the struggle to American values and the nation’s history. It also underlines how George Washington had contributed to the U.S. revolution through militancy before he became president. For Lee, a future ruler of the free nation could have been among the ranks of protesters and it was important to hear them all out.

Race was explored in *Daredevil* through a different scope, that of Vietnam, but it was secondary to another war-related matter: veteran reintegration to society. Opposition to the Vietnam conflict also took its toll on the veterans as they were made to carry the burden once they came back home. As Dennis J. Stauffer, a Vietnam war veteran, wrote in a December 5, 1982 *Grands Rapids Press* article titled “The Bitter Homecoming”: “The Viet



vet became a scapegoat for our country's involvement in an unpopular war" (1). They were often disrespected or questioned for their service in the military and, because of it, "many veterans quickly discarded their uniforms after returning home; it was easier than facing humiliation in public places" (1). Furthermore, the amount of Vietnam veterans that suffered from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was alarmingly high. According to a number of studies cited in a Massey University research, "postcombat transitional factors" such as "nature of military discharge, perceived helpfulness of veterans' families on return of Vietnam, isolation at homecoming, and family stability" (qtd. in MacDonald, et. al. 64) contributed just as much to the affliction of PTSD. Thus we see how the return of a soldier to their homeland could have been as traumatic as witnessing death in the battlefield; as if they had arrived to another minefield that happened to look like their home.

All these factors were personified in an African American veteran named Willie Lincoln who was first introduced in *Daredevil* issue #47 (September 1968). The story opened as Daredevil traveled to Vietnam to perform for the troops and, just as Lee had said in the 1967 radio interview, a caption in the first page reminded readers that they were not "tossing a war story" (Lee and Colan 1). Among the crowd of soldiers was Lincoln, an officer who had lost part of his sight in the field of battle. Midway through the performance, Lincoln lost the rest of his sight (he had been told by doctors that it could happen at any time) and was taken to a makeshift hospital where he is visited by Daredevil. The two converse and the subject of reintegration comes

up. Willie, a former New York cop, acknowledged that his blindness would hinder any form of normalcy upon his return. Feeling familiarized with the handicap, Daredevil tells him to look up Matt Murdock for assistance once he is back in the United States. On the plane ride, we are offered insight into Matt's thoughts on war and its veterans. It is one of the few instances where the war is referenced directly as something real instead of an element within the fictional Marvel universe:

**War!** The most **brutal**-- most **idiotic**-- most **loathsome** manifestation of all that's **wrong** with mankind! And it's always the **youngest**-- the **finest**-- the **best** of our people that pay the highest price! The world will **never** be able to repay the **debt** it owes-- to the countless **Willie Lincolns** who gave their last full measure of loyalty and devotion! (8).

We can gather from the quote that even though Stan Lee's thoughts on the war had shifted to a more critical stance, he did not believe that the veterans were to blame for the situation. Unlike those who used them as scapegoats, Lee regarded soldiers as people who swore loyalty to their nation and carried out what they were ordered to do. Following this logic, the fault would then be ascribed on those who made the decisions for them— i. e. the government.

Back in U.S. shores, Matt Murdock helped clear Willie Lincoln's name from a false accusation of bribery. But it was only after they won the case that Lincoln learned about Murdock's blindness and felt inspired to move on in life: "Y'know boy-- just a **short** time ago I thought I'd really hit bottom! ... Now, even **without** my eyes-- I'm looking **forward** to tomorrow-- for the first time! I feel like I'm **part** of the human race again! (20). Lincoln would reappear a number of times in the series and each time he would give an update on how his reintegration to society went. In *Daredevil* issue #49

(February 1969) we learned that he found work with the Urban Corps as a “liaison between the cops and the soul brothers” (Lee and Colan 14) and, after becoming a regular in Murdock’s office, even helped Daredevil hunt a crime lord named Crime Wave in issue #59 (December 1969). But Lincoln was just one case out of the thousands of veterans who arrived from Vietnam and needed help readjusting. Sadly, not all the veterans in the real world were lucky enough to find a Matt Murdock in their lives. Soldiers that showed no signs of PTSD immediately upon returning were at high risk if their readjustment encountered problems (MacDonald, et.al.). Stan Lee and Gene Colan’s depiction of a veteran’s experience brought understanding to those who might have been too deep into the fervor of the epoch to distinguish the military complex from the individual.

#### **FEMALE REPRESENTATION**

Finally, with the arrival of a feminist movement in the social sphere, the representation of women was somewhat divided during these last years of the decade. While already-established characters just sank deeper into their stereotypes, the newer ones enjoyed strong character development that reflected the philosophy of the contemporaneous women’s liberation movement. Beginning with the first, the case of Sue Storm can still be traced to the classic Marvel definition of the “feminine.” Instances such as in *Fantastic Four* #63 (June 1967) when Sue lost consciousness midway through a battle and later pointed at her femininity as the source of her weakness: “Forgive me.. for.. suddenly turning feminine!” (Lee and Kirby 20) kept fueling the idea of the inferiority of women. But one has to keep in mind that

Sue was a married woman now and that, for some bizarre reason, it meant that she was different from unmarried women. Issue #64 (July 1967) began with Sue demanding more time from her husband who had been working nonstop for days. Reed's first response is to tell Sue to "use your **head** for a change!" (Lee and Kirby 2) and alludes to her lack of investment in science or the team. Sue takes Reed's words hard and complains that he had never "talked to [her]— like this-- **before** [they] were married—!!" (2), but Reed calms her down by admitting wrongdoing and Sue continues with "I don't mean to be a nagging wife, dear! It's just that I can't help-- **worrying** about you!" (2). Here we see again the idea of "nagging wife" that was first uttered by Reed in the second phase, only now it has been assimilated by Sue as something that cannot be helped. It is also implied that Reed is at fault for not dedicating enough time to his marriage because, even though he may have other callings in life, a wife has only one calling, and that is her marriage.

Sue's tantrums would continue to occur in the stories and with more frequency. In issue #65 (August 1967) she "quit" the superhero business citing "I want to be involved with **super-markets**-- instead of **super-villains!**" and "I'm a **woman!** I want feminine **dresses**-- foolish **hairdos**—!" (Lee and Kirby 4). Reed intercedes once again by promising to take her out shopping and Sue, pleased, replies "Darling-- I don't know what to **say**-- **Fine!** Wives should be **kissed**-- and not heard! (4). Unbeknownst to the rest, the Invisible Girl's days on the team were numbered.

In *Fantastic Four* #70 (January 1968) the team was made aware that Sue was expecting a child and immediately became a liability after the

announcement. Over the following issues she was either left out of the missions or sent away to focus on the baby's well-being and Crystal, Johnny's love interest, eventually filled her vacancy in the team. Even though Crystal belonged to the superhuman race of Inhumans, which the Fantastic Four had met during the second phase, her real capabilities were never explored. In *Fantastic Four* #81 (December 1968) Crystal joined the team on an adventure against a skeptical Richards's opinions and surprises everyone. During a fight, her elemental powers gave her the advantage over their foe and she contributed greatly to their victory. In the end of the story, an astonished Richards apologized for ever doubting her and made her an official member of the Fantastic Four (20). After this instant, women were finally portrayed in stories as essential part of the adventures (*Fantastic Four* #87 from June 1969 is an example). But the human mind takes time to adapt to new ideas and, in issue #88 (July 1969), the writers took a step back by reminding everyone that "Every girl can be domestic ... when it **matters!** (Lee and Kirby 19) as a response to a Johnny Storm inquiry. And so it would seem that although women were finally given a more essential role in the *Fantastic Four* world, their domestic abilities were just another superpower in their tool belt.

Other books also rode the strong female wave even though they were not written by Stan Lee. In *Uncanny X-Men*, Jean Grey (Marvel Girl) made a name for herself as a reliable member both through brains and brawn. This did not mean the book was exempt from instances where it seemed that the writers also took a step back. In issue #39 (December 1967), Jean followed the tradition of other female heroes that acquired new costumes for their team in a



**Fig. 10.** Breaking barriers (Thomas and Adams, *Uncanny X-Men* #63, page 14)

scene where her excitement for fashion worried the other companions (Thomas and Heck 15). But for the most part, her character was regarded as a strong member of the X-Men. She was also portrayed as cocky, confident, witty, and very strong (see Figure 10), which differed greatly from the portrayals of other Marvel superheroines. Most notably, her existence opened the door for a woman to pen a small character bio in the last five pages of issue #57 (June 1969). The five-page piece, titled “The Female of the Species!,” was written by Linda Fite and began with a caption by Stan Lee telling readers that “it’d be glitzy if, just for a change, this featurette on the mesmerizing **Marvel Girl** were written by a member of the supposedly **weaker** sex! (Fite and Roth 1). Inside the piece, Jean is portrayed as having knowledge of science and admits that she is “not exactly the **domestic** type” (2) among other things. Once again, we have the concept of the

“domestic” that was previously assumed as an essential part of the woman being referenced as something optional. The change in perspective was due, to a large extent, to the contemporary feminist philosophies of the time. Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon’s study of the late-sixties’ second wave of feminism mentions how the idea of housework was broadened by the liberation movement after 1967: “feminists demanded recognition of housework as labor that could be shared by all members” (5). Comics, in instances such as this, were an important tool through which revolutionary ideas and hot issues could be tackled for the benefit of the readers.

Jean Grey was later joined by another much-needed strong female presence named Lorna Dane in *Uncanny X-Men* #49 (October 1968). Though she was thought to be evil at first, Dane unofficially joined the X-Men after falling out with her “father,” Magneto, in issue #52 (January 1969). But in addition to being gifted with powers comparable to her dad, she had a personality that was just as strong. Whenever someone like Bobby Drake (Iceman) threw misogynistic remarks at her such as “my chick,” she would retort with “I’m **nobody’s** property, Bobby... Except my **own!**” (Thomas and Adams, *X-Men* #61 15). This sentiment was echoed in the rest of the books whose female characters, even the ones that did not possess superpowers, seemed to be made aware of the unjust portrayal they were made to perform until then. For example, Zelda and Vera, the women Bobby Drake (Iceman) and Hank McCoy (Beast) stood up each time they were called to avert a crisis, finally wised up and demanded some respect: “Somewhere... maybe deep in the wilds of Brooklyn... two girls may exist who will believe *anything* you

irresponsible clowns say!” (Drake and Roth, *X-Men* #47 15). In *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Peter was being courted by two women who represented opposite sides of a spectrum: Gwen Stacy was an academic scholar with a promising future while Mary Jane Watson was a free-spirit with a confidence to match. None were the typical damsels in distress of years prior and could easily fend off by themselves. *The Avengers* often crossed paths with the Black Widow, a former Russian special ops agent who defected to the United States and *Captain America* had Agent Thirteen, love interest of Steve Rogers and top SHIELD agent who had lines like “I may be **female**-- but that doesn’t mean I’m **helpless!**” (Lee and Romita, *CA* #114 9) while slapping an evildoer across the neck. As the decade came to its end, one thing was certainly clear: these were not the same heroes that had first appeared almost a decade before.

### *1.8. Closing*

In a 2012 keynote address given at the 28th National Space Symposium, astrophysicist, cosmologist, author, and science educator Neil deGrasse Tyson recalled the role of space exploration in 1960s culture as the main catalyst that paved the way for economic, technologic, and scientific achievements. He also emphasized on how entertainment programs such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1963) were also encouraged by the contemporary space-oriented culture: “Our presence in space [was] affecting not only the engineers and the mathematicians and the scientists, it [was] affecting the creative dimension of that which we call culture. We [were] living it at every turn” (*Space as Culture*). As we saw during the first phase of the Marvel



revolution, the comics also made use of the semiotic ecology of the space race for its groundwork. It manifested through portrayals of hero scientists who wished to know more about the outer limits and plant their nation's flag in the findings as a sign of superiority. But comics did not just cling to one aspect of the space age. Their writers also took symbols from other cultural happenings of the times and kept rolling with them as time went on because, just as the space race, they also held their influence over the creative dimension of culture. Themes that ranged from international relations to the closer, more immediate, domestic disputes became intertwined in stories that fortified or challenged the preconceived values of the reader. The symbols found in the panels of the comics, which take from the personal experiences of their authors as artists and as inhabitants of a particular ecosocial system, form part of a much larger essence of meaning that seeks to communicate its message through language (Merrel). The serialized nature of comics allows for a message to be built from various issues more like a sentence is made by a group of words (signs). In this sense, Umberto Eco, in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, attributes two complementary perspectives to this process of communication:

One cannot think of the sign without seeing it in some way characterized by its contextual destiny, but at the same time it is difficult to explain why a certain speech act is understood unless the nature of the signs which it contextualizes is explained (22).

Each comic book panel corresponds to the context of its previous and following panel, keeping a cohesive line in the story that delivers a thought. But the utterance of the whole issue and, furthermore, its significance in a

successive line of issues responds to the firstness (Peirce), exteriority (Derrida), or nature (Eco) of meaning; also known as the historic context.

In this chapter we have explored the history behind the superhero genre and its evolutionary process. We also detailed the contexts of the 1960s to which the comics of the various phases immediately responded to. These were instances where the context had a *direct* influence over the language (visual or textual) in order to reflect itself. This inhabiting of structures can be analyzed to deconstruct the plurality of languages, social discourses, or mentalities that developed during the given moment in time (Derrida). But there is another form in which context, through another language mechanism, can reflect itself in the writing of the comics. It belongs to a much older tradition of storytelling that communicates its message in an *indirect* manner through analogies. The mechanism, which is the subject of Chapter 2, is the ability to deliver meaning through metaphors.

## Chapter 2: Metaphor

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.

-Frederich Nietzsche

And each had its mythology—some, pitifully fragmentary, but others, **marvelously** rich and magnificently composed. These mythologies were all conditioned, of course, by local geography and social necessities.

-Joseph Campbell

### *2.1. Truth Be Told*

In the previous chapter we explored how context influenced the language—and therefore, writing—of the comic book authors who used their experiences to build the constantly-developing Marvel Comics universe. Each day's unfolding of events served to inject new combinations of words and visuals into the superhero narratives, immortalizing them in the process. But, what allowed for it to happen in the first place? How can readers understand a narrative that is not presented in a concrete manner? In this chapter we will detail the creative processes and language mechanisms that allow for context

(reality) to be masked behind symbols and, afterwards, we will analyze a number of character-metaphors in the Marvel books that grant a different meaning to their stories because of what they represent.

In linguistic terms, the linguistic tool which allows for meaning to be concealed is the metaphor, and its application in heroic narratives can be traced back to writers from the earliest civilizations who used it to create divine heroes similar to modern superheroes. Myths have been long regarded as completely fictional accounts with no factual basis due to their magical nature. Those who share this opinion are not aware that their existence and frequency are due to the imprecision that language exerts over actual meaning. This factor has been taken advantage by authors throughout history from Homer to Stan Lee, and serves as the cornerstone of language theory that explains their existence. Because of this, it is necessary to begin this chapter with the common denominator that encompasses both superheroes and myths and then move on to *how* the Marvel comics made its own use of symbols.

One of the earliest modern figures to shed light on language's imprecision with truth was the German philosopher Frederich Nietzsche in his 1873 essay titled "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense.". In his argument, Nietzsche underlines a tendency found throughout human history in which the truth is concealed as a tool for survival: "As a means for the preserving of the individual, the intellect unfolds its principle powers in dissimulation" (889). The act, according to the philosopher, reaches its highest point in man through "Deception, flattering, lying, deluding, talking behind the back, putting up a false front, living in borrowed splendor, wearing a mask, hiding behind

convention, playing a role for others and for oneself” (889) among other manifestations that question the possibility of truth ever arising from anything that is uttered by man. The frequency with which humans trade false testimonies or “dissimulations,” as Nietzsche refers to them, is so common that they have become widely accepted and are taken as truths, prompting the philosopher to establish that mankind ultimately allows itself to be lied to due to habit. But, as we eventually find out, these “lies” are the result of a much larger deficiency in our system of communication: the lack of connectivity between the “form” (word) and the essence of the thing it refers to (object). This flaw in our language, which prevents “truth” from ever being present in the first place, is what eventually leads us to habitually conceal reality in our speech. Therefore, for Nietzsche, the whole of language is but a system in which “metaphors” are employed in lieu of the objects of truth: “we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities” (891). Human beings are thus deprived of an accurate mechanism to communicate truthfully. Our understanding of language comes from concepts that we have built about the “forms” as a society. We then mediate the significance of objects through stand-in metaphors whose meanings are accepted collectively but never bring us closer to the truth.

In addition, language can also make use of its own metaphors through figure of speech and further the truth even more. These are the metaphors that we are better acquainted with due to their common use in figurative language. A quick dictionary search of the term can reveal

definitions such as “A figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable” and “A thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else” (*English Oxford Dictionaries*). In this sense, they are the act of replacing a sign for another with the purpose of delivering a transcendental or “higher” message. When presented with this dual discourse of metaphor *as* language and metaphors *in* language, semiotician, author and philosopher Umberto Eco, in his *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* book, establishes that a “radical choice” must be taken into consideration when approaching their variety:

either (a) language is by nature, and originally, metaphorical, and the mechanism of metaphor establishes linguistic activity, every rule or convention arising thereafter in order to discipline, to reduce (and impoverish) the metaphorizing potential that defines man as a symbolic animal; or (b) language (and every other semiotic system) is a rule-governed mechanism, a predictive machine that says which phrases can be generated and which not, and which from those able to be generated are ‘good’ or ‘correct’, or endowed with sense; a machine with regard to which the metaphor constitutes a breakdown, a malfunction, an unaccountable outcome, but at the same time toward linguistic renewal (88).

Regarding the quote above, statement (a) is an extension of Nietzsche’s “forms” and objects idea. Since language is, by nature, the substitution of metaphors for objects that are not present or whose essence is unreachable, then the use of metaphors in writing or speech is but a continuation of the functions stemming from language’s metaphorical foundation. On the other hand, statement (b) presents the notion of a “correct” or “standard” state of language and variations that can be found within. The existence of metaphors in this statement represents a stylistic choice by an author to break with language norms in order to deliver a particular statement.

It must be made clear that the two statements are not mutually exclusive in the sense that one does not cancel the other out. They can be used either side-by-side or one after the other when approaching a study of metaphors. Eco presents them as “radical choices” because a person can choose one notion over the other at any given moment without discarding the possibility of the other also obtaining a valid analysis. But, if any of the two ideas are followed to their maximum, they reach the point of logical fallacies and become unstable. This balance is but one of the various challenges the study of metaphors entangles.

## *2.2. A Brief History of Metaphorical Storytelling*

Regardless of the fundamental workings of language, the authoring of metaphors rests completely on the human condition. According to Nietzsche, centuries and centuries of metaphors are not just evidence of a deeply-rooted problem in language, but of another inherent impulse found in the human being as well: “The drive toward the formation of metaphors is the fundamental human drive, which one cannot for a single instant dispense with in thought, for one would thereby dispense with man himself” (894). We see that just as the lies found in speech are the result of a larger fault in the system, the frequency with which these “anomalies” appear throughout history is due to a human factor that has made a habit of communicating through metaphors. Nietzsche continued to determine that metaphors have been generally channeled through *art* and *myth*, two conduits that deliberately confuse “the conceptual categories and cells by bringing forward new



transferences, metaphors, and metonymies” (894). They share the ability to take words and images with preconceived meanings and alter them by placing them in different contexts. Furthermore, art and myth have also shared the element of an external drive or push since early in their conception. Both have been fueled by what another German philosopher by the name of Ernst Cassirer describes as “spiritual motives” which oversaw their analogous evolution through time. For now, we will focus on the language-myth relationship since art in general can be considered as stemming from the larger construct of a belief system. Afterwards, in section 2.5., art will be discussed in the role it played birthing modern (secular) myths and how they were built on the same language foundation as the previous mythology.

In his 1925 book *Language and Myth* (first translated into English in 1946), Cassirer sought to pinpoint, with detail, the factor that bound language and myth together. He began by dismissing a debate in comparative myth studies that disputed the primacy of language over myth or myth over language. The argument for the latter was that since language is composed of metaphors (as Nietzsche stated) and metaphoric language was the foundation of myth (one of Eco’s possible statements), then language was a myth that we accepted as a complete truth-value. This view would shift the perspective from myth as a linguistic endeavor to language having a “divine” nature. But Cassirer calls the dispute “specious” for treating the subject as if it were a “which came first: the chicken or the egg?” affair instead of focusing on how they sustain a reciprocal relationship where both systems continually feed off

the other. For the philosopher, the idea of myth is inconceivable without language and vice versa:

Language and myth stand in an original and indissoluble correlation with one another, from which they both emerge but gradually as independent elements. They are two diverse shoots from the same parent stem, the same impulse of symbolic formulation, springing from the same basic mental activity, a concentration and heightening of simple sensory experience (88).

The two conduits aim to satisfy the author or myth-maker's of substituting real experiences ("senses," in Cassirer's terms) with metaphors. One difference (if one is allowed to call it that) is found in the "spiritual excitement" to which they serve. This excitement, according to Cassirer, is what "furnishes both the occasion and the means of its denomination" (89) and varies depending on the zeal of the social and historic context in which the language-myth is conceived. Early civilizations coincided in religion as their main point of excitement, thus resulting in a large quantity of religiously-themed myths. However, this does not mean that religion is the only fervor that can serve myth as a source of inspiration.

Although Cassirer intended to distance myth from any all-language or all-"divine" perspective, his definition still placed it under a linguistic —or semiotic, better yet— schema by bonding the two through an "impulse of symbolic formulation." In other words, even though language and myth are not one in the same, they can still be analyzed following similar methodologies due to them sharing similar foundations. Furthermore, Cassirer's take on myth allowed for subsequent linguists such as Roland Barthes to declare that "myth is a language" (ii) of its own in the preface of his

1957 book *Mythologies*. The whole of Barthes' study focuses on how contemporary mass culture (pop culture) outlets such as wrestling, advertising, and film —among many others— still make use of the signs and structures of classical mythology to build their narratives. This is possible due to myth being a type of speech (109) that can be appropriated and employed in order for the public to feel familiarized with what they see or hear even though it is “packaged” in a relatively new form. Barthes reinforces previous notions of myth being a “system of communication ... a message ... a mode of signification” (109) that borrows from a wide variety of cultural factors in order to exist and whose meaning can be traced back to its context. He also takes on the notion that myths are a purely false narrative by clarifying that they do not repress the truth of objects, but merely place them at a distance (136). This intention also distinguishes myth from ordinary language, which attempts to tell the truth even though it cannot. The users of the metaphorical language that is myth, who are influenced by the same external elements as ordinary language, do not intend to *reflect* the truth, but *simulate* it: “The [mythological] writer's language is not expected to *represent* reality, but to signify it” (137).

Barthes' research and methodology belongs to a larger intellectual movement that sought to validate myth among the academic circles. Until the early 1900s, the predominant perception of myths either reduced them to “child-like ‘play’” (Hawkes 41) or followed a trend that could be traced as far back as the ancient Greek Palaephatus (Powell 22-23) in which they were considered a misuse of language: mistakes made by users with little scientific

knowledge of the world. The purpose of the structuralism movement in the study of language—which stemmed from Saussurean linguistics and semiotics—was to look for patterns and commonalities among myths from different cultures in order to prove that they held a “more sophisticated relationship with the world, and with the society that generates [them]” (Hawkes 41). Other proponents of the movement such as ethnologist and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss were more specific in their approach. Levi-Strauss’ research dealt, to some extent, with how “the structures of myths prove actually formative as well as reflective of men’s minds: the degree to which they dissolve the distinction between nature and culture” (41). The view supposes a semiotic analysis of the signs and themes found in myths as reactive to their immediate social context. A myth scholar or analyst can therefore extract more meaning from the story if they possessed knowledge of the cultural and historical context in which it was conceived. However, since the approach was similar to ordinary linguistic methodologies, it was meant to encompass but a fragment of the whole structuralist purpose. Myths had to be simultaneously looked upon as something different from regular language due to their use of metaphors and relationship with the truth; the both of which did not require previous knowledge of its historic or cultural components. For the power of myth does not lay in the manner it delivers its message, but in its significance:

Whatever our ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader anywhere in the world. Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the *story* which it tells. Myth is a language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning

succeeds practically at ‘taking off’ from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling (qtd. in Hawkes 43).

Every myth or mythological figure embodies a message —either about morals or other ethical argument— regardless of its narrative and setting. Certain structural factors within (or beyond) the narrative are responsible for carrying the “substance” to the receivers. Any author may take a myth, modify some of its elements, and it would still have the same effect on the receiver if the essence is left intact. What began as a consequential trait from the oral tradition followed the genre into its textual form and became the characteristic that makes myths transcend and outlive other language creations.

Language, metaphor, and myth may share similar characteristics in their development and structure, but they are far from being one in the same. Each serve their own distinct purpose within the larger scheme of language systemacities even though their differences may become truly apparent after a close analysis. Nevertheless, one must learn to see them as individuals in order to understand how they complement each other in execution. The ability to employ metaphors in ordinary language is characterized by the switching of certain signs intended towards delivering a message with another meaning. It is a direct form of communication that requires both the creator and receiver to posses knowledge of what the switched signs mean in order to know why they could be exchanged. Likewise, mythical language sees the application of metaphors but to a much greater extent. Not only can signs be switched, but whole story structures and happenings are made to wear a mask and seem like something else. For this reason it is said that the language of myths is a

*metaphorical language* whose meaning must be decoded by the receiver through analogies. Truth is present in both cases and in different forms as well. Ordinary language treats it as its main endeavor, trying as much as possible to reach truth even if it means adding more language in the form of an explanation. On the other hand, what characterizes mythical language is its embrace of not being able to reach truth and creating something from that acceptance. The result, as Roland Barthes said, is a message told in a way whose meaning is found at a remove, but that exists nonetheless.

### 2.3. *Marvel Authors as Bricoleurs*

For a long time, it was widely believed that metaphorical narratives were the result of savage mentalities trying to explain their surroundings and therefore lacked any facts or scientific impetus for that matter. Because of this, Claude Lévi-Strauss titled his 1962 work *The Savage Mind* (*La Pensée sauvage*, in its original French) and sought to uncover a link between the myth-maker (or magic-maker) and the scientist. In the beginning of the book, Lévi-Strauss establishes that one of the main differences between magic and science is the first's vagueness when compared to the empirical precision that is found in the second: "the first difference between magic and science is therefore that magic postulates a complete and all-embracing determinism. Science, on the other hand, is based on distinction between levels" (11). Yet, as with myth's estranged relationship with the truth, this does not mean that the magician's attempts are without some degree of accuracy. A previously-cited Siberian native people's system of herpetology (8) serves as an example

to show that, even in arrangements borne out of “primitive” or non-scientific rationale, one can still witness an over-encompassing logic behind their methods. In addition, the anthropologist acknowledges that although it may not have been a practical system of medicine (which is what it was intended for), the Siberian peoples’ system of herpetology still met the “intellectual requirements” (9) found in scientific exercises of such nature and could therefore lead to some actual discoveries, because “since scientific explanation is always the discovery of an ‘arrangement’, any attempt of this type, even one inspired by non-scientific principles, can hit on true arrangements” (12). The priority should then not be to focus on what distinguishes magic from science, but rather to underline the similar characteristics that are found in both their methods regardless of the accuracy in their conclusions.

The differences between magic and science take the passenger seat as finding a correspondence between them becomes the main driving force of *The Savage Mind*. Both ventures function equally in seeking to answer questions posed by their users regardless of the differences that inspire their methods. Therefore, the common denominator in both magic and science is their quest towards relaying information that is gathered from observations: “It is therefore better, instead of contrasting magic and science, to compare them as two parallel modes of acquiring knowledge” (13). In this line of thought, science is personified by the engineer, an agent who methodically seeks to find definitive answers to their questions by means of specialized instruments or procedures. On the other side, representing magic or myth, is what has come to be known as the *bricoleur*, an agent who carries out similar

observations as the engineer, but whose methods towards handling them take from “local” and rather unconventional means:

The ‘bricoleur’ is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’, that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always **finite** (emphasis added) and is also heterogenous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or deconstructions (17).

The idea of the *bricoleur* that should be in everyone's mind is of an artist in an wide open space with a large canvas and miscellaneous objects thrown around. The goal is to produce something, but an exact outline or a list of the objects that must be used does not exist. The working space and canvas themselves are already-established tools from the art tradition, yet the inspiration and combination of elements “at hand” can only come from the improvisational mind of the artist. We therefore regard the Marvel authors, the various writers and artists involved in the granting of meaning to the symbols and narratives in the comics, to be like the *bricoleur* for resembling their methods during the creative process of a story or, in keeping with the terminology, a *bricolage* (the thing the *bricoleur* produces). As authors of the comic medium, they kept within certain boundaries of the writing tradition which includes heroic tales and the comic book medium (panels, pages, dialogue bubbles, etc.). But by borrowing heavily from their surroundings, they innovated on the superhero tradition and established a new trend that is still followed to this day.



It must be established that the *bricoleur*'s administration of "whatever is at hand" cannot be limited to the physical objects such as a pen or brush that the comic book author may use. The idea can also be applied to the various sources from where they gather the inspiration and the language geared towards shaping their productions such as historical events or political events that stem from their context —any other mean that exists without any type of relationship with the project. Thus, one must not allow oneself to be confused by the words "hand" or "tool" which can lead to undermine one of the most limitless devices humans have practiced since the beginning of civilization: the human mind.

In keeping with the aforementioned notion, Lévi-Strauss considers mythical —or metaphorical— thought as a type of "intellectual 'bricolage'" (17) due to it being the combination of concepts (magic, fiction) and precepts (science, facts). In a similar form, the Marvel creators took narratives from their context and intertwined them with concepts from the hero tradition that had been developing for decades. By appropriating different elements from their cultural reach, they elevated superhero narratives from mere entertainment status into an informative level, something that had only been openly contemplated before by William Moulton Marston, the creator of Wonder Woman. Furthermore, we can establish a link between the "finite" nature of the *bricoleur*'s materials and the Derrida's definition of the finite in writing. Historical events such as war or politics are "finite" due to their immediacy and existence not being geared towards any artistic goal or project. The *bricoleur* includes the finite in their work because it is in their nature to

offer commentary on their immediate social and cultural surroundings by other means that are not scientific (19). Their role throughout history has been to inform subsequent generations of historic events through stories which are then passed down by members of each generation.

Jacques Derrida echoed the idea of the *bricoleur* and even gave it a deconstructive spin in his *Of Grammatology*. For the French philosopher, both the engineer and the agent of mythological speech not only borrow from finite and infinite sources, but do so in order to do away or radically change whatever they appropriate in the process: “the most inventive and systematic engineer are surprised and circumvented by a history, a language, etc., a *world* (for ‘world’ means nothing else) from which they must borrow their tools, if only to destroy the former machine” (139). The purpose of appropriating something is not to repackage and deliver it in the original state. On the contrary, the *bricoleur* appropriates historical and literary precepts in order to create something (relatively) new out of them. This is what can be understood by “destroy the former machine,” which is to say, to radically change previous perceptions and structures of the appropriated elements like how Marvel redefined the superhero narrative with its arrival. Furthermore, we are made aware that the engineer’s methods, as a product of historic and cultural factors, are still somehow influenced by finite necessities. In this sense, they are very much like the *bricoleur* in using “finite” tools. Nevertheless, Derrida states that this does not mean that they should be classified together, since the latter sustains a “theological” difference or, in other words, a difference in spiritual

motive with the engineer and thus not all of their processes or results are equal.

The main focus of deconstruction is, as was established earlier on in the first chapter, the process that leads to and allows for criticism to take place. By making use of the finite, the *bricoleur* acknowledges their place within a particular social context and, from there, they are able to formulate a critical *bricolage*. This conscious inhabiting of a cultural structure allows for a deconstruction of the various discourses found within and is exactly what we have constantly seen being performed throughout the Marvel Silver Age. The language tools available to the Marvel Bullpen served as the gateway into the inside mechanics of the sixties. The subjects that either birthed the characters or carried their development throughout the decade were glimpses of the various narratives and opinions from the moment they were conceived in. Together, they form the amalgam of sentiments and events that make up the decade as a whole, but separately and in conjunction with the superhero narrative, they were made to be part of another, larger scheme of literary and hero traditions.

Finally, what ultimately links the *bricoleur* to the Marvel author is the fact that they both work with metaphors or symbols (Lévi-Strauss 20), and that they both exercise a poetic license when manipulating them. This brings us back to the Nietzsche statement we quoted back in section 2.2. about how myth deliberately “confuses” and introduces new uses for signs or words in general. These superheroes and their narratives are possible due to the creator’s ability to deviate from the rules established by reality or those found

in grammar. The Marvel characters to be discussed later on are personifications of collective experiences and ideologies of the sixties. They are visual symbols that mediate the plurality of narratives through even more forms of symbolism and have become correlated as such in the collective memory of both readers and non-readers. A similar situation can be witnessed when a novelist personifies a concept in a story or when a poet appropriates a given word and places it in a different context in order to grant it newer connotations. Whether it be changing words in a piece of text or placing god-like beings in real-life situations, the author's imagination, as the ground zero of the creativity that leads to the manipulation of symbols, is a vital characteristic that can also be found in the *bricoleur*.

Support for the idea can be found in Paul Friedrich, a linguist and anthropologist who studied the relativity behind language productions due to poetic licenses in his 1975 book *The Language Parallax: Linguistic Relativism and Poetic Indeterminacy*. In his thesis, Friedrich establishes four basic concepts that must be assumed of the language user when approaching creative works such as these: first, that the imagination of the language user is a valid representative of the sociocultural context in which they write or speak; second, that language is “inherently, pervasively, and powerfully poetic” in the sense that it constantly manifests and does not hide its metaphorical foundation as we have discussed it; third, that it is the poetic nature of language which exerts influence over the language user's imagination; and fourth, that poetic language and the language user's “chaotic” imagination are constantly interacting in a circular motion which

makes them mutually dependent on each other in order to establish progress (16-17).

In a sense, the first two concepts bear resemblance to the general argument that we have been building throughout our dissertation about language as a product of social conventions and the storytelling tradition's inclination towards metaphorical narratives, but from a much more personal or individualist perspective. By imagination, the linguist refers to "the processes by which individuals integrate knowledge, perceptions, and emotions in some creative way which draws on their energies in order that they may enter into new mental states or new relations with their milieu" (18). The unconventional methods of the *bricoleur* immediately come to mind given that they also exhibit the ability to use any element —knowledge, perceptions, and emotions — that is not intended towards any project and that their goal is to achieve a new "state" with what was appropriated. Also, the fact that the elements are "finite" in the sense that they are conditioned by the user's contemporary history takes us further into the *bricoleur's* spectrum and can be better grasped by the third concept, which suggests that it is language's poetic (or metaphorical-mythological) nature that influences the imagination into seeking new combinations of signs. As we established earlier on in the chapter, this is also possible due to the passing down of storytelling traditions such as the hero since the dawn of writing. The *bricoleur* takes aim for their *bricolage* by basing themselves on the backlog of poetic or metaphorical language that already exists. The symbol-substituting pattern is replicated by subsequent generations who apply their own imagination (which is

conditioned by their unique contemporary context) and grant it relevancy by using language that is pertinent to a specific moment in time. Then, as the context presents new and different material, the *bricoleur's* imagination keeps churning ideas that, in turn, keep inspiring future generations to do the same.

The last basic concept in Friedrich's thesis can be used to solidify our idea of scientific and political events entering the creative sphere of the *bricoleur*. Since it is language that inspires the human imagination and it is the latter that opens the doors to new intellectual trends or movements in general, both are destined work hand in hand towards innovations in each's own respective areas. For example, as the imagination of the Marvel bullpen interacted with the science boom of the era, the comics also included new uses for technology based on fantastic ideas. These ideas, as language, entered the vernacular of others who used their imagination to shape real scientific or artistic creations. This is what has come to be referred to as when "science fiction becomes science fact." In a similar fashion but in a non-tangible form, political or philosophical ideals never come from a void. They are the result of years and years of development being connected by an individual's creativity. Language is almost always one step ahead of the imagination in this relationship, given that the idea has to be widely disseminated as language in order to be appropriated by a collective. Then, as the imagination of others begin to interact with the language of the new concept, some will begin to use their personal experiences to transform it into something even newer. The *bricoleur* then, is synonymous with the innovator, since it is they that keep the

cogs of creativity turning whether it be in politics, art, or even scientific discoveries.

It must be noted that the back and forth between imagination and language can take place in different levels and in different parts of society. Vico is quoted stating that metaphors are characteristic of social groups at the awakening of their intelligence. The amount of metaphorical narratives throughout time is evidence that numerous intellectual awakenings have occurred and that they have been closely followed by works of language throughout. Intellectual movements bring about new language that, upon reaching the imagination of the social group it takes place in, can then be modified or innovated upon by adding and subtracting language. Furthermore, the linguistic cycle between the Age of Heroes and the Age of Man that we proposed due to the foundational myths of our society being static is another two-tier system that reflects the cyclical interaction between language and imagination. As the new concepts of a society come to life in the Age of Heroes, the reason that dominates the Age of Men brings about new philosophical ideas that can be also brought to life after interacting with an individual's imagination. Because of this, there can be no established order that explains whether it is the language that influenced imagination first or if it is the other way around. Both are constantly and eternally being swayed by the other and each case is different from the previous instance.

#### 2.4. *Writing and Metaphoricity of the Marvel Age*

Many pop culture figures and scholars have agreed in some way with the idea that superheroes have become the modern mythology. Film director and writer Kevin Smith has stated on numerous occasions how the tragedy element in stories such as Batman's likens them to the tragedies found in classical Greek tales while Michael Uslan, co-producer of various superhero adaptations and the first accredited instructor to teach the subject of comic book folklore at any institution, has been lecturing on the historical, literary, and cultural value of the medium since the 1970s. As recent as 2015, Uslan developed a free online course on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University-created "edX" platform titled *The Rise of Superheroes and Their Impact On Pop Culture*. Said course dabbles on the mythological aspect of superheroes and includes a video portion where he can be quoted as saying:

The Greeks called him Hermes, the Romans called him Mercury. And you and I, well we just call him Flash. The Greeks called him Poseidon, the Romans called him Neptune, but you and I, we call him Aquaman. It is linked.

The vagueness with which the relationships are established in the quote can serve to summarize how shallow these efforts have been thus far. Each time a comic book superhero has been equated to a classical mythical hero it is usually followed by a comparative analysis that does not extend beyond their narrative structure or the parallels in the traits of the characters. This is due to most of the initiatives emulating Joseph Campbell's studies, particularly *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), a seminal work of comparative



mythology in which the author appropriated several concepts from psychiatrist Carl Jung's theory of archetypes to find resonance among the mythologies of the world. The angle, although valid and productive, can only obtain results after a match-making process of the finished stories and a checklist of common characteristics. It can in no way shed light on what is it that causes them to be made in the first place. We therefore intend to break with this tradition just as Cassirer broke with the comparative mythology arguments of his time and propose a look at the superhero narratives as part of the greater language-mythology evolution. Our interest with the Marvel universe in this chapter lies within the linguistic processes that gave way towards the creation of these particular superhero metaphors and how said symbols are able to signify a myriad of narratives within their narratives.

We proceed with a statement from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's views on writing, which establishes that "to learn to read and write in alphabetic writing should be regarded as a means to infinite culture" (qtd. in Derrida 25). The motive behind this idea stems from a consideration of language's relationship with truth (which we have already explained in the first section of the chapter). The act of writing supposes an organized breakdown of the mind's senses. It offers a direct channel to the human interior unhindered by space or time as it overcomes both the instant in which it is executed. Hegel also believed alphabetic writing to be the most intellectual and truest of communicative endeavors, prompting academics to consider the history of writing to be analogous with the study of mentalities across time. This placed the historical trajectories of both writing and human

mentalities along linear paths where progress was continuously built over the achievements of their own past. Furthermore, Jacques Derrida commented on Hegel's thoughts in his *Of Grammatology* and expanded on what makes writing so boundless:

it is also the best writing, the mind's writing; its effacement before the voice, in it which respects the ideal interiority of phonic signifiers, all that by which it sublimates space and sight, all that makes of it the writing of history, the writing, that is, of the infinite spirit relating to itself in its discourse and its culture (24-25).

With this quote it is easier to decipher what both philosophers meant by granting an "infinite" element to writing. What actually transcends are not necessarily the topics that each author writes about (though there is also a culture of them being passed down due to another reason), but the overall practice in itself that serves as an example for future readers and writers. It is the act of reflecting (through writing) on one's existence—within the limits of a specific culture and moment in history—that outlasts the limits established by history. Thus, a culture arises from a discipline that involves channeling the experiences of the mind onto symbols on a page, all the while looking back at previous examples for inspiration. Themes may bear similarities primarily because they follow the flow of mental development through history and, secondarily, because they follow a literary tradition found in previous samples of writing. The culture renews itself each time a new entry is made and is granted perpetual life by the same process.

It is only logical that written language, just as ordinary and metaphorical language, be also driven by an impulse of symbolic formulation (Cassirer). It would also be logical to assume that said form would be

encumbered with metaphors and metaphorical language from the outset as well. Written language presents yet another conduit through which users can convey the mind's senses and, because of it, it has mirrored every major linguistic tendency throughout history. Moreover, humanity has witnessed it evolve from picture-based signs to acquiring an alphabetical structure; intertwining with mythological language many a time in its trajectory. Still, an idea arose that favored non-metaphorical or "literal" writing among philosophers such as Hegel. To this thought, Derrida countered by exposing various inevitabilities of writing such as the idea that language possesses a metaphorical foundation and, at the same time, shifted the attention to those instances where one can actually extract some "literal" meaning from writing regardless of style:

The paradox to which attention must be paid is this: natural and universal writing, intelligible and non temporal writing, is thus named by metaphor. A writing that is sensible, finite and so on, is designated as writing in the literal sense; it is thus thought on the side of culture, technique, and artifice; a human procedure, the ruse of a being accidentally incarnated or of a finite creature (15).

Here we wish to center on Derrida's correlation and apparent subdivision of writing forms. The first kind, which he describes as "universal" and "non temporal," is attributed to the metaphor that, after learning about metaphorical language, can be said to be the sort of writing commonly found in myths. It is the type of speech that allows for stories to withstand the test of time and be appropriated by anyone for personal use (Barthes 109-110). The second, which he describes as "sensible" and "finite" (time-sensitive?), lies in the immediate context of the writer. They include references to events or ideas

relevant to a particular moment time and do not age well for this very same reason. It must be noted that Derrida's characteristics are not meant to create a divide in the sense that authored works do not have to be classified as purely metaphorical or purely literal. They are to be understood as colors in a palette that authors make use of whenever they create and thus can be seen in unison among works involving language.

While the first chapter of this dissertation was concerned with the "finite" writing found in the Marvel Silver Age, those instances in which the historical context somehow managed to seep through the cracks and that we were able to interpret by mediation (analogy), we now turn our focus to the other form of writing also found in the comics, the "infinite" writing that is attributed to the metaphor.

As we established earlier on, humanity has held an age-old tendency of communicating through signs that do not sustain a concrete relationship with their objects. In addition, a bias in the narratives has leaned towards using metaphors and metaphorical language to approximate reality. Whether it be ordinary, mythological, or written language, they all experience different levels of metaphoricity and the language of comic books is no exception. Said language, as we established in the first chapter, applies two forms to deliver its message: textual and visual language. The first, the words, can be considered as stemming from the same metaphorical nature of ordinary language (Eco 88). Its role in the comic book page economy is literary along the lines of textual publications and are not necessarily "finite." The second, which also stand in as depictions of truth-objects that are not present, complements the

text by working in unison and can be regarded as visual metaphors according to Eco (89). We therefore arrive to the unadulterated base of the comic book language still without the intervention of morals or a “higher” meaning. In this state, it can only deliver “literal” messages through the combination of signs just like any other system.

Metaphors as figure of speech in comics can also be viewed as stemming from its language’s metaphorical base and as exceptions to its rules (Eco 88). In terms of the latter, comic language can employ metaphors of its own by taking conventional situations found in the world and depicting them in an altered manner so as to make certain characteristics stand out. For example, in a battle of good versus evil, heroes are depicted with exaggerated characteristics such as extreme strength or abilities, while villains usually are portrayed as the opposite. They are modified portrayals that push the limits of reality by not being restricted to its laws. Other examples may include an immigrant from another planet that can leap tall buildings and a millionaire playboy who fights crime as a masked detective with an unlimited arsenal of weapons. And so, even though their presence may not be *literal*, as in, their existence is not plausible in the real world, they still stand as metaphors of real collective experiences to some extent.

In the case of the Marvel Age of Comics, the choice to use supermen instead of ordinary humans was not a coincidence. The frequency with which these characters had graced the pages of comic books decades prior (during the Golden Age) had cemented them as representatives of the medium in the minds of many. But the overall decision-making procedure was also within the

boundaries of a linguistic scheme. Recalling Giambattista Vico's thoughts on the authoring of metaphors, Umberto Eco stresses that "metaphors are the result of a selection of pertinent aspects" in which "cultural constructions" (108) of the target audience are taken into consideration. In other words, Stan Lee deliberately chose superheroes in the beginning of Marvel because he understood the implications of the superhero metaphor in the comic book medium he intended to work on. Furthermore, one may pose the question of what was the decision-making process based on before the first superhero was ever introduced. In order to answer this, we must revisit a point discussed in the first chapter and apply Hegel's concept of writing as an "infinite culture" to it. In section 1.2. *Context*, it was established that the superhero had borrowed from various literary tropes that had come before it such as the Frankenstein and the pulp characters of its immediate past (Coogan 126). If we were to view this in the grand scheme that is the history of writing, we would discover that these metaphors (Frankenstein, pulp heroes) also borrowed from previous literary traditions and follow a line of progression that can be traced as far back as the mythological heroes of ancient times. Thus, according to Eco, it is over a pre-established "language of heroes," the name given to the culture that stemmed from the mythological story tradition, that subsequent writers are able to build their new metaphors:

The language of heroes already creates metaphors (which thus are not so primeval), but the metaphor or catachresis invents a new term using at least two terms that are already *known* (and expressed) and presupposing at least another one that is unexpressed (108).

The formula for new metaphors is simple according to the semiotician. A writer can take at least two well-established literary tropes and innovate by adding a third, relatively new characteristic. In the case of the first superhero, one need to look no further than an essay by Eco himself from 1962 (translated into English for the first time by Natalie Chilton in 1972) titled “The Myth of Superman.” In the text, the secret identity of Superman is presented as the main innovation that modernized the classical hero by combining its mythological trope with another, more contemporary literary device:

This new dimension of the story sacrifices for the most part the mythic potential of the character. The mythic character embodies law, or a universal demand, and therefore must be in part *predictable* and cannot hold surprises for us; the character of a novel wants, rather, to be a man like anyone else, and what could befall him is as unforeseeable as what may happen to us. Such a character will take on what we will call an “aesthetic universality,” a capacity to serve as a reference point for behavior and feelings which belong to us all. He does not contain the universality of myth, nor does he become an archetype, the emblem of a supernatural reality. He is the result of an universal rendering of a particular and eternal event (15).

In hindsight, Eco’s belief that the novel element would prevent the superhero from reaching its mythic potential was misguided at best. Superman became the archetype of a whole supernatural genre and ascended to the pantheon of American myths despite the new dimension in its narrative. Still, there is some truth to be extracted from Eco’s words as to the duality of the superhero and about how its innovation was the result of the combination between a “finite” literary tradition and an “infinite” culture of writing.

The Marvel revolution in turn innovated on the two-decade old superhero metaphor by adding yet another layer of the novel: internal turmoil.

This rapid innovation of the genre was possible due to the aesthetic universality of the earliest superheroes, the factor that allowed readers to connect with the characters, having worn out relatively fast. Many felt that first superheroes were still too perfect regardless of their human dimensions and could not relate to them beyond a character's moral stance. As a 1952 report commissioned by UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) and performed by French professor Philippe Bauchard noted:

Being above human contingencies, the superman is also free of material difficulties. Not only do no money problems afflict the hero, who does not apparently have to provide for his own needs, but motor cars, buildings, telephones, planes, etc. are used without its being thought necessary to state who owns or maintains them (36).

The task of the new Marvel metaphor had been to address these observations that had come from a high authority and that had caused a chain reaction across the globe. Several groups in a number of countries had begun calling for the prohibition of the superhero narratives for fear that they might corrupt or misguide children. The success of Marvel meant that this innovated form of the superhero metaphor would become the new archetype over which other narratives would have to be built upon, as famed comic book writer Grant Morrison remembers in his *Supergods* book:

The Promethean age had been announced; the time of men as gods who bore fire in the palms of their hands had come. And with that recognition of the superhero's Promethean dimension came the acknowledgement of punishment, Fall, retribution, and guilt—themes that would resonate through the experience of a very unusual generation of children. From now on, having superpowers would come at the very least with great responsibility and, at worst, would be regarded as a horrific curse (89).



And so, the emotional distress brought by the Marvel Age allowed for a greater reference point for behavior and feelings since it was something that affected everyone equally but on different levels. The new heroes could very well have been more human than mythical if we followed Eco's strict classification, but that did not thwart their mythic potential any less than it did Superman's in the long run.

### *2.5. A Higher Power*

The use of personified concepts in an narrative is not sufficient to fulfill its meaning potential. A narrative with metaphors requires a larger meaning that can be extracted from its whole account in order to be understood. Roland Barthes states that —linguistically speaking— the ulterior motive is an indispensable part of any mythological story: “Motivation is necessary to the very duplicity of myth: myth plays on the analogy between meaning and form, there is no myth without motivated form” (126). The reader must then be able to extract the enshrouded meaning by analogy, which will depend on their social and historic awareness since “it is history which supplies its analogies to the form” (127). The mediums through which these metaphorical narratives are delivered —art, literature (including comic books), music— must be thus considered as vessels: bodies that require a spirit to deliver meaning in more than one sense. The spirit that fills them comes from the authors who make their story about a higher purpose (usually about an ethical subject) that is relevant to their immediate historic context and that is presented in a universal form that grants it relevancy across time. The culture

of a “finite” subject being told in a metaphorical (“infinite”) form is what allows stories to be rewritten and acquire new elements that are relevant to each moment of reinvention.

Like myth, comic books were initially conceived as a form of entertainment that later proved to be susceptible to the higher signification authors could bestow upon them. Our concept of the entertainment industry and the large amount of mediums in our daily life may prevent many of us from seeing any of them as having any mythical potential but, as we mentioned earlier in section 2.2., myth is a type of speech that can be employed in any production stemming from language and its various incarnations:

Speech of this kind is a message. It is therefore by no means confined to oral speech. It can consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as support to mythical speech (Barthes 110).

In addition, there is still a widespread misconception among the mass populace as to the purpose of metaphorical narratives. Many still believe that they can only serve religious ends and, furthermore, come from primitive civilizations trying to grasp reality. But the fact of the matter is that the driving force or “spiritual motive” (Cassirer) behind a metaphorical (or mythological) narrative can actually be anything that holds the center of attention in the culture from where its author writes. It can be a concept, an ideology, or even an event that manages to capture the people’s attention for more than just a brief moment in history. We therefore ascribe to Barthes’ statement that “anything can be a myth” (109) as long as society appropriates it in such a

way that it is “adapted for a special type of consumption, laden with literary self-indulgence, revolt, images, in short with a type of social *usage* which is added to pure matter” (109). One way to understand how the Marvel superheroes met some of these requirements would be to dig into the popular “pop” culture conventions and “fandom” movements that were emerging around the same time. Sadly, such inquiry would derail us from our immediate goal and therefore we prefer to rather encourage its analysis to anyone who wishes to take it upon themselves.

Finding a spiritual motive for the Marvel age is not a difficult endeavor. During the 1950s, scientific pursuits were placed at the center of all attention in the global theater. International and domestic interests surrendered to the conquest of space exploration in an effort that trickled down to every pillar of society. As the sixties began and president John F. Kennedy determined reaching the moon a priority of his administration, the scientific aspirations converged with the nationalist ethos known as American exceptionalism. The United States was not going to succeed because its people were finally going to get their act together; they were going to succeed because, in their opinion, they were simply better and more capable as a whole. They had a better form of government, better economic system, better sense of morality, and their citizens were exceptional—they were supermen! This new version of the exceptionalism ethos re-fueled by scientific pursuits became the spiritual motive behind the new Marvel superheroes that often distinguished themselves from their enemies by their particular set of values. The rationale was evidenced on the numerous occasions where a Marvel hero

squared off against a communist counterpart and it was the American's concept of justice or their ability to feel compassion that often gave them the upper hand. What was actually represented in those pages were not just fictional beings, but the personification of the United States' ideal subject reacting to the political tensions of that particular moment in time.

The one-sidedness and oversimplification of political relations in the Marvel stories is yet another characteristic of mythical speech that Barthes presents in his study as *depoliticized speech* (143). By "political," the linguist refers to the complications brought by the human condition that abound in the real world. Myth strips history and context of the details it deems superfluous, and leaves but an impression of the idea from where it takes its meaning: "In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics..." (143). Situations are depicted in black and white; there is only complete good and there is only total evil. For example, during the first phase of the Marvel revolution, superheroes were the only symbol of righteousness against a number of stereotypical representations that alluded to the communist tyranny. Later, as the years progressed and ideological tensions within the United States seemed to resemble an endless web of entanglements, the Marvel depictions became even more diluted and the creators received negative attention for doing so. Still, all these portrayals present a problem when one acknowledges that their meanings came from politically-motivated events and thus were *political* in a sense. Barthes recognizes the constriction involved in using the term "*depoliticized*" and takes a step back by

paraphrasing Karl Marx in saying that, regardless of myth's streamlined version of things, "the most natural object contains a political trace, however faint and diluted" (143). We are then left with the imagery of myth mounted on a see-saw with reality just as Derrida had mentioned in his paradox of "finite" instances within "infinite" writing. Mythological speech may keep truth or "politics" at a distance, but the exact degree to which that distance extends to varies for each case.

Science also played a major role in the genesis of the Marvel pantheon and not just as devices in their plots. According to Eco's summary of Vico, the intellectual and creative atmosphere in which the United States found itself all through the sixties was the perfect breeding ground for metaphors and metaphorical speech of such nature:

the creating of metaphors is an inborn ability in beings who are at the dawn or **awakening** (emphasis added) of their own intelligence; metaphorical speech, furthermore, would be iconic as it instituted a kind of native onomatopoeic relation between words and things (*Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* 107).

The United States' renewed efforts at the spacial pursuits of the era had brought about a re-awakening of its capacities. The American spirit that had remained dormant for most of the 1950s finally realized that it could accomplish any task if it so desired. Science served both as the symbol of intellectual ambition and as the spark that spurred a series of productions in various artistic outlets such as music, television, radio, and writing—forms that made use of the new metaphors offered by the context. In a sense, science was elevated to the point that it became the modern man's religion and, like other faith-based systems, offered its followers solace in what the future could

bring. It should not come as a surprise that much of what was produced during this time —the most of which made use of mythical speech to different degrees— ended up being *iconic* or emblematic, both in the manner they delivered their message (comics, movies, television, etc.) and in referencing their historical moment of creation.

Vico also added that these “awakenings” of social and mental activity can be seen repeatedly in various points of history and that they form part of a cyclical scheme that can be categorized as follows: the Age of Gods, the Age of Heroes, and the Age of Man (qtd. in Powell 27). The first corresponds to the phase in which the main focus of a society is its survival through basic means such as hunting, harvesting, and their relationship with nature. Myths during this phase are mostly of divine nature and centre around the subject of creation. They are also local in scope, since the social group is exclusively invested in themselves during this stage of mental activity (Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space* 32). The second, the Age of Heroes, corresponds to when “Emerging social institutions are connected with personified gods and heroes about whom stories are told” (Powell 28). During this phase, new metaphors are created out of the necessity to cope with social changes. Finally, the Age of Man comes to apply reason and philosophy to the first two phases in order to explain its myths in concrete manners. Our research lies with the second phase, since it is not possible for society to revert back to the first stage unless some global catastrophe catapults it there and resets all form of known traditions in its wake. The foundational myths of our various contemporary cultures’ first phase have remained unmoved for the

most part and still account for the primary belief systems in the world. Nevertheless, the social institutions around them have changed more than a few times as time has progressed and new heroes have been raised out of the necessity to grasp with the transitions.

In the United States, the scientific boom of the sixties became the catalytic element for another jump into the Age of Heroes whose results have remained relevant until now. Since then, the mentalities have moved back and forth between the second and third phases as part of a process in which new ideologies are processed first by fantastic stories and then by logic or “hard” facts. One could argue that the Golden Age of Comics that came before the sixties parallels Vico’s Age of Gods while the so-called Modern Age of Comics that came in the late eighties with Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1986-87) and Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) resembles the Age of Reason for superheroes, but that is an idea that we would rather leave up to the consideration of the readers.

Throughout history, it has been common to see new heroic narratives in times of idealistic or political shifts such as the one in discussion. The “dawn” or “awakening” of social awareness should not be viewed as a rare phenomenon in the history of a social group, but as an often-recurring experience that takes place each time change is ushered by philosophical or technological advances. Processes like these can begin at the highest levels of authority and gradually trickle down down to the rest of the sectors within a society, but they can also spring from the bottom up. The new ideas are disseminated in the form of language that artistic creators then validate

through fresh myths and artistic productions. Since superheroes are metaphorical stand-ins of various common experiences within a society, they are pitted against the new ideologies and are made to act out the transition from the older perspectives into the new ones for the benefit of the group; or as mythologist Joseph Campbell states: “the purpose and actual effect of these [metaphorical narratives] was to conduct people across those difficult thresholds of transformation that demand a pattern not only of conscious but also of unconscious life” (*The Hero With a Thousand Faces* 10). The Marvel comics served to inform readers of the happenings of the times. They introduced readers to cosmic rays, nuclear fears, ventures, and ideological tensions had they been kept in the dark or could not visualize how they might be portrayed. Moreover, the crossing over from one form of thinking to another not only influences the topics of the stories, but it also extends to affect *how* the story is told as well. The appearance (or reappearance) of images in the narratives can also be attributed to another cyclical scheme, but of linguistic development. Since languages closely follow the progression of mental flows, a social group’s awakening of intelligence also inspires a resurgence in pictorial storytelling, a form that is misattributed to primitive thinking and therefore thought as being less intellectual. But, as Eco concludes from Vico’s work:

If metaphors require an underlying cultural framework, then the *hieroglyphic* [visual] language of the gods cannot be a merely primitive stage of human consciousness: it needs the presence of both the *symbolic* language of heroes and the *epistolary* [written] language of men as its starting point. Thus Vico is not speaking of a linear development from a metaphorical language to a more conventional



language, but of a continual, cyclical activity (*Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* 108).

And so we have that just as the authoring of metaphors requires a capable mind to switch the signs, the authoring of the language of heroes (Eco refers to it as the “language of the gods” in the quote without differentiation) requires dominion over the forms of language—visual and textual—commonly found in the heroic storytelling tradition. This second notion supports Vico’s aforementioned cyclical scheme of the three different Ages by evidencing them through language productions and suggesting that the cycle of human mentalities also carries over to a cyclical change of writing forms. The comic book creators’ choice of using images and text to communicate their message is therefore not just decision dictated by monetary reasons nor does it implicate a lesser form of intelligence; it is a natural part of history and writing’s evolutionary processes that re-emerges every now and then during a time of social awakening.

The visual factor in the Marvel stories is an essential characteristic of the mythological narrative. Images are not restricted to a reader’s understanding of a particular language and can travel a farther distance because of it. They also allow for meanings to outlast the restrictions of time and culture by escaping the consequences that come as a result of languages becoming extinct. For these and many more reasons, Joseph Campbell declares that “without images (whether mental or visual) there is no mythology” (*The Inner Reaches of Outer Space* 19). The comic book medium, as literature, has the distinctive feature that it includes the visual

representations of the stories it conveys unlike books, whose imagery depends solely on the reader's mental constructions. The facilitating of the representations actually does little to thwart the comic book reader's imagination since they still have to fill in the movement and sound, but it does serve to bind a determined symbol to a specific meaning with each published entry. The physical appearances of characters such as Captain America are hermetically sealed to their historical ideologies just as the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, Spider-Man, and the rest are intrinsically linked to the spirit of scientific exploration that dominated the early sixties. The urge behind what pushes toward this binding of sign and meaning is the being's very same impulse of symbolic formulation that is found in language. The Marvel superheroes can therefore be seen as the vocabulary of a much larger system of metaphorical communication. As elements of a language, they are influenced by the context in which they are used in and, as symbols, each is charged with the task of embodying different meanings or stances from its contemporaneous surrounding. Additionally, they also form criticism by inhabiting the social structures they portray and comment on them by acting out a narrative that is the product of the author's personal experiences.

### *2.6. Metaphors in the Marvel Age of Comics*

The following analysis includes a number of character-metaphors that can be found throughout the published Marvel comics from 1961 to 1969. In order to distinguish this analysis from the previous chapter's (and as a way to further recognize metaphor's role in language), the analysis presented hereon

is of characters or groups of characters that stand in for a totality of experiences or meanings. They are symbols that have been endowed with an established significance and, therefore, what becomes priority in their analysis is not how their narrative developed through time (or how context shaped it), but rather how their presence in the narratives served to shape the message that was delivered. In order to decode the message, one must know what these symbols (or the meaning behind them) stand for and then contrast that significance with their new setting. Some of these character-metaphors are able to create discussion by their presence in the story alone, but others require certain actions within the narrative to be distilled.

We follow Eco's statements on how one may regard metaphors as either stemming from language's poetic nature or as a "malfunction" of the rules of language. While we certainly do not believe them to be mere accidents, we do wish to take the second road and add elements from the study of myths to better suit our approach. The metaphors presented in this analysis shall be considered as *deliberate* "mistakes" committed by the Marvel authors with the intended goal of delivering a statement through an allegorical situation. This allowed for a number of real-world narratives to be represented through super-powered beings who reacted to their surroundings.

It is here that we witness how the linguistic process of switching symbols (creating metaphors) interacted with the social and intellectual awakenings of the sixties, and gave way for another Age of Heroes (Powell 28; Eco, *Semiotics* 108) to come about. The motives behind the masking of the meanings to which the metaphors allude to are varied and

range from emphasizing on social subjects to raising awareness for said topics. In this aspect, we find correspondence with the myth-maker who uses metaphorical language to speak about a certain subject or event by distancing the narrative from the essence of its truth-object (Barthes 136). In both cases, the meanings behind the allegories lay outside the text; in the world in which the *bricoleur* takes its tools from (Lévi-Strauss 17; Derrida 139). The reader must then decode their meaning through analogies that obtain better results depending on their knowledge of what the symbol represents.

### *2.7. Captain America: An Ideal Out of Time*

Ever since he arrived on the scene in 1941 as a creation of Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, Captain America was meant to be a direct metaphor of the North American experience during World War II. Proof of this can be found all throughout the very first issue (dated March 1941), particularly on the cover, where the newly-introduced “Sentinel of Our Shores” was depicted punching Adolf Hitler in the face. The imagery was meant to appease a growing disdain towards the Austrian-born dictator who, up until that moment, had been seen with neutral eyes by the United States government despite his actions (Knuston). Captain America thus embodied the values that the U.S. subject felt that distanced them from the enemy during a time of war. But, as soon as the war ended, Captain America’s appeal to the reading masses dwindled and his days as a published superhero became numbered. Even a switch from Nazi to Communist villains did not do enough to save the title from going under in the late 1940s (Knuston). The meaning behind the symbol had come and gone

with the times as the passing of time and events offered no relevancy to the metaphor. That is, until 1964, when it was brought back by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby with the sole purpose of reflecting the change of mentalities within the United States, but ended up becoming another “passionately liberal” figure borne out of the sixties.

Captain America’s return was portrayed in *The Avengers* comic book, beginning on issue #4 (March 1964). In the story, a frozen Captain America was found by Namor, the Sub-Mariner, and eventually reached the hands of The Avengers who thawed him back to life. It is unclear whether there was an ulterior motive behind the return of the hero. Stan Lee has often stated that he always wished to bring the Captain back because he remembered the character fondly. However, on the first page of the issue, Lee actually wrote that they were “Bringing you the greatest superhero which your wonderful avalanche of fan mail demanded!” (Lee and Kirby 1). The idea that there was a consensus requesting Captain America’s return is open to question, since it is difficult to unearth the exact correspondence among the other Marvel publications that, as Lee stated, clamored for the return of the character. It is due to this and other reasons that we present the theory that, since it was during this time that Lee and Kirby still believed the war to be a simple “good versus evil” ordeal, the return of the Captain was initially meant to serve a propagandistic function: he was to be a reminder of a “better” time when the U.S. citizens believed in their government and gathered in support of their country— the opposite of what



Fig. 13. A meaningful return (Lee and Kirby, *The Avengers* #4, page 10)

was happening in 1964 due to the civil unrest brought about the Civil Rights and anti-war movements.

Support for our theory appears within the very same pages of *The Avengers* issue #4, in a scene where the Captain heads out for the first time and is instantly recognized by an officer on patrol. At first, the policeman's reaction is of incredulity, but after being assured that it is the actual Sentinel of Liberty in front of him, the tone of the reaction changes to concern combined with patriotic emotion: "But you've come back-- just when the world has **need** of such a man-- just like **fate** planned it this way! Forgive me, Cap, willya? I-I seem to have something in my eye! (Lee and Kirby 10). The overall theme of the exchange gives readers the sense that things had changed for the worse while the Captain was away. If we were to take the officer's lines and contrast them with what was happening outside the text, in the world of the *Marvel bricoleurs*, we would see that a negative change did occur in the public's perception of the United States, its government, and the military; all of which

Captain America represented. Because for those who still believed in the government and their decisions, the growing anti-war sentiment may have seemed like an ungrateful thing to believe in and, in the case for the Civil Rights struggles, an undemocratic thing to condone (regarding the riots and protests). The United States had undoubtedly strayed far from the path it followed back in the 1940s when the Captain had made his first appearance. Thus, the return of the metaphor that purported American exceptionalism and other values of yesteryear contrasted greatly with its new context. In a sense, the Marvel universe was witnessing the second coming of its messiah and he was (hopefully) going to make things right again.

Captain America returned to action in *The Avengers* issue #6 (July 1964) and quickly reminded everyone how situations are efficiently solved when the red, white, and blue is in command. Baron Zemo, an old nazi acquaintance who had been hiding in South America since the end of World War II, learned of the Captain's return and launched an all-out attack on the Avengers. The event finally allowed the Captain to show the new generation of readers his superior strategic knowledge by formulating an effective counterattack and saving the day. The decision was met with high praise from the other team members who exclaimed: "See how quickly he conceives a battle plan... How smoothly he goes into action! It was a lucky day when we added **Captain America** to the roster of the Avengers! (Lee and Kirby 12). The notion that the U.S. citizens should assume a demeanor such as the one that existed during WWII cannot be overlooked as a possible interpretation for this scenario. Captain America, as the personification of a previous wartime

mindset and the behavior that it implied, was depicted as being better suited to lead all sort of military operations be they past or present. The message is not only produced in the allegorical scenario of the Captain assuming control of the situation, but it is also further supported by the group's praising of his decisions which may symbolize the people's ideal attitude towards their government. Furthermore, when Captain America finally faces Zemo in one-on-one combat near the end of the issue, his words reflect a rehashing of WWII language and features lines such as "I still remember how you sneered at democracy... how you called Americans soft... timid..." and "The world must never again make the fatal error of mistaking compassion for weakness!!" (20). This displacement of narratives also reflects the author's perception of the Vietnam struggle at the moment that this issue was written. Their *naïveté* implied that, regardless of the situation, America would always play the role of the "good guy" —as it had done in WWII— in any dispute. They could not understand that each situation had its own particularities and much less foresee that, by the end of the decade, they would be seeing things from a completely different perspective.

After *The Avengers* issue #6, nostalgic perceptions about wartime and the role of government would not be forced on contemporary events again and Captain America would never follow through with his (perceived) mission of turning public opinion around. Instead, the character was sent through a personal journey —sparked by the further escalation of contemporary social events— that involved questioning his significance in contemporary society and the political ideals of the contemporary government.





Fig. 14. Posttraumatic Stress (Lee and Heck, *The Avengers* #9, page 2)

If Captain America was initially a metaphor for the American experience during World War II, then what occurred with the character after his return can be said to be a metaphor of the transformation of Stan Lee's views about the Vietnam war and the U.S. nation during the sixties. The character's transition into a more critical viewpoint parallels the Marvel author's very own ideological transition and suggests that Lee, either conscious or unconsciously, was somehow able to portray his thought process through the character. The first instance of a change in character began in *The Avengers* issue #9 (October 1964), where it was implied that the Captain was being afflicted by a type of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The situation involved a struggling Thor, Iron Man, and Giant Man trying to subdue an enraged Captain America who was lashing out against what he thought was Baron Zemo when, in reality, it was nothing but thin air (Lee and Heck 2). As a result of certain events from his past, the Captain now suffered from trauma that could manifest itself in the form of hallucinations. In simple words, he would see things where there were none. In a similar fashion, the same could

be said of Stan Lee who saw “goodness” in the Vietnam conflict because he insisted on a preconceived (past) notion of America. Another form in which we could interpret the situation is as a comment on the harm that old forms of thinking might inflict on the new generation of soldiers who only wished to defend their country from actual threats. They, the soldiers, were being sent to battle to chase an enemy formed out of a washed out or inexistent narrative.

A second event that alluded to the existence of PTSD came much later in *The Avengers* issue #18 (July 1965). After noticing that, unlike the other members, he does not serve any other purpose besides fighting, the Captain began to question his role in contemporary society: “Is this how I’m supposed to spend the rest of my days--? --Ramrod of a mighty fighting team, yet without a private life to call my own!” (Lee and Heck 2). If we recall from the first chapter, a soldier’s return to civilian life was one of the factors that could contribute towards PTSD. Any abnormalities during the reintegration process could add to the veteran’s larger trauma and manifest itself in a number of ways such as questioning their place in society. Nevertheless, since Captain America is the personification of an abstract identity from a previous generation, the lack of available roles in the new environment could serve as a direct comment on whether the new context held any space for old beliefs or vice versa: whether the old styles of thinking were applicable to contemporary society. In addition, both of the aforementioned scenarios can be used to display the dangers of holding on to a fixed notion of nationalism by



**Fig. 15.** A living anachronism (Lee and Heck, *The Avengers* #18, page 2)

presenting the ideal's lack of adaptive capacity to newer elements brought about the progress of time.

A couple of panels later, in that very same page, another point is raised concerning the symbolic nature of Captain America. Moving past the fact that the new context did not offer substantial meaning to support his existence, the fact that there had been a shift in philosophy either among the U.S. citizens or in the government meant that the Captain, as a symbol, did not have anything or anyone to represent anymore (see Figure 15): “How much **longer** can I go on this way-- being a living symbol to millions-- and yet, a frustrated anachronism to **myself!**” (2). On the outside, the Captain still seemed like a representation of the North American nation that had given him his name. But on the inside, he was fully aware that the exteriority of his sign had ceased to exist and that he needed to find something to fill the void of meaning. This is a key characteristic that separates Captain America from the rest of the heroes in

the sense that, because he is a living metaphor of a particular nation, he requires the immediate context to grant him relevancy in order to make sense to others and to himself. Whereas other super-powered beings would just go about with their adventures unaffected by the displacement of time, the Captain requires his presence to be sustained by context-established ideology just as words in a sentence require meaning by its users in order to make sense to the author and the target audience.

After months of deliberation, Captain America reaches the conclusion that his quest for meaning should not obstruct his role as leader of the Avengers and continues living life waiting for the day when his new purpose would arrive. The decision can be interpreted as Lee coming to terms with the fact that his initial views about the Vietnam war and the United States' decisions in Indochina were somewhat misguided, but since he was a citizen of the nation and the events were still unfolding, he would wait some time before taking another stance. This is not to say that he felt indifferent towards the subject, but rather that he entered a transitional phase where one stops being so vehement about a topic and is open to discerning opinions.

Stan Lee's remaining issues as writer for *The Avengers* never came around to further developing the Captain's search for a new ideal. Instead, stories focused on the personal and interpersonal relationships among the members of the team. Friction between Captain America and Hawkeye over leadership concerns became frequent and often alluded to the first's outdated style of handling the group's state of affairs. These situations usually ended up with one of the heroes leaving the team, but returning after an impromptu

adventure reunited their forces and made them realize that they worked better together. Finally, in December 1966 (issue #35), Lee handed over writing duties to Roy Thomas, another member of the Marvel Bullpen, and for the rest of the decade, the search for Captain America's meaning would not achieve any progress in *The Avengers*. Communist enemies, analogies, and even more squabbles between team members became the usual order of the day as the sixties neared the end of their tenure. The development of the Captain America metaphor seemed to have hit a roadblock, that is, until Stan Lee and Jack Kirby decided to give the character another shot in 1968. The main difference was that this time, the Captain would have his own separate title.

*Captain America* witnessed a resurgence of various topics that had been introduced in *The Avengers* prior to Lee's exit. For example, the Captain's trauma due to a lack of external meaning resurfaced rapidly in issue #101 (May 1968) during a fight with the Red Skull: "Can't you **see??** You're an **anachronism!** You belong in the dead **past!!** The world --has no more **use--** for **idealism—!**" (Lee and Kirby 18). This time, the Captain's answer to the subject of anachronism reflected an optimistic outlook on what the future could bring. Whereas his first contemplation of the subject did not seem to offer any solution, the Captain now saw this problem as a phase that would eventually come to an end. Here we can establish another clear parallel between Lee's developing ideology and the metaphor of Captain America. As popular opinion on the Vietnam war reached an all-time low in 1968, many U.S. citizens were certain that their involvement in the region was beyond salvation and voiced their opposition to the continuation of military

intervention. Lee, as the middle-man that he had always been, bet all his cards on the future and the uncertainty of what it could bring while, at the same time, feeling certain that whatever came next would surely grant some distance from its catastrophic present state. For some, this may not seem that much different from his previous decision in *The Avengers* #18 when he left everything up to the hands of fate. But in reality, the presence of optimism in Captain America did grant the character some purpose even though it may only have been ephemeral. It was a form of recognizing that the exteriority of the Captain America metaphor was not in its current context, but in the possibilities of what the context could become. And, since the country was divided between different groups that voiced their opinions on how the country should be run through democratic means, any possible outcome would suffice.

The remaining *Captain America* issues of the decade did not venture far from the formulaic nazi or communist scenarios. These occasionally stressed the fact that the Captain lived with some trauma that must be dealt with before facing a new obstacle. But on the very last book of the decade, *Captain America* issue #120 (December 1969), a new step was taken towards a definition of meaning for the character. Steve Rogers, the Captain's alter ego, decides to look for a job at a university in order to catch a break from the costumed adventures. Once at the institution, he is met by a then-familiar situation: a student protest had broken out and a couple of students had gotten into a heated argument with a professor. Noting that the professor would be hurt if the skirmish continued, Rogers reluctantly breaks off the fight and

sends the students away. The change in ideology is perceived as the professor thanks Rogers for helping him and Rogers answers: “Have you ever tried **listening** to what they’re [the students] after? (Lee and Colan 8). This moment marks a change in the Marvel political tone that would permeate throughout much of their productions of the seventies, especially in the *Captain America* title. By giving the students the benefit of the doubt, a conscious decision was made to finally step out of the middle ground of political matters and lean towards a definitive side of an argument.

Captain America’s questioning of the “establishment” would serve of utmost importance during the following decade as subsequent writers turned the character into a metaphor for political weariness. It was largely due to his suspicion of the U.S. government in the early seventies that he eventually stumbled upon the new exteriority for his symbol. After facing off against the president United States in a story that closely emulated the Watergate scandal under the Richard Nixon administration, Steve Rogers would hang up his Captain America persona as a sign of protest and become Nomad, the hero without a country. But, since nothing in the comic book world lasts forever, Rogers would eventually return to his Captain America uniform and vow to protect the ideal of the American subject rather than any given government or administration. Thus, the Captain America metaphor found its exteriority in the idealization of what it means to be American rather than what Americans could be at any given moment in history. This ensured him a immobile meaning that would not be affected by the progress of time and has maintained itself a constant factor of the character to this day.

### 2.8. *Inhumans and the X-Men: Misunderstood Otherness*

Given that the sixties were a decade in which numerous minority groups voiced their opposition against the status quo, it would only be natural that the subject of different social perspectives would find itself represented on the characters of Marvel comics in one way or another. Such was the case with the Inhumans and the X-Men, two teams that embodied —to a certain extent— the marginalized-group narratives that had become widespread during the decade. But these creations were not without their faults. They were constructed by individuals who still identified with or belonged to the dominant perspective and, because of it, only encompassed a minimalist, *depoliticized*, account of the extremely idiosyncratic web of social relations.

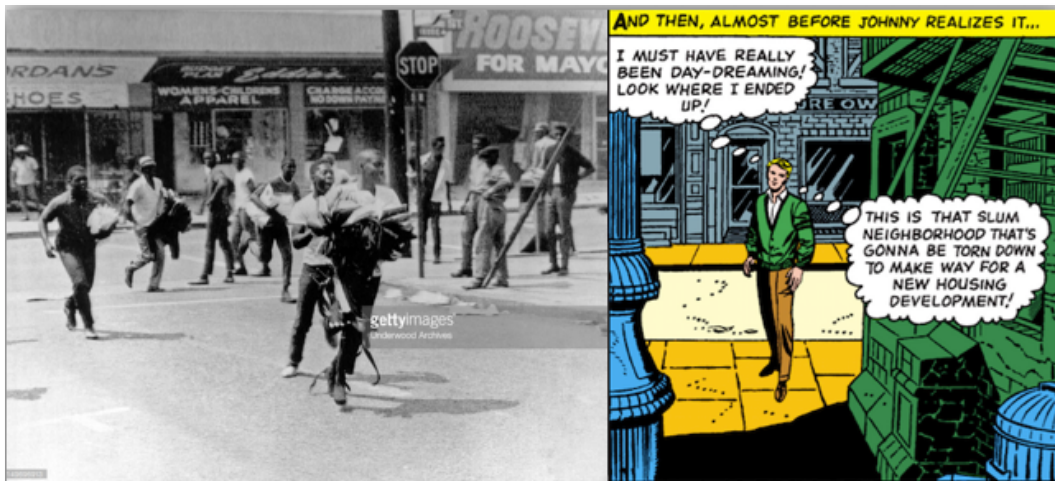
The act that allowed for the construction of these character-metaphors can be attributed to the same process that allows for the existence of an “other” in society. In this respect, otherness is understood as a construction that engulfs the totality of a group’s experience, but that is made through the look or gaze of an outside position —someone who does not belong the particular group or experience being observed. To better illustrate the concept, Jean-Paul Sartre imagined himself looking at someone (the other) through a keyhole. In that moment, Sartre’s actions turn into an unconscious effort in order to focus on the object being observed (qtd. in I’Anson 20). In cultural terms, the watcher (Sartre, in this case) does not recognize himself as an anomaly because his whole state of being is perceived as the standard within a context or culture. Furthermore, what the watcher sees through the keyhole



will be highlighted by the *comparisons* they establish between them and the observed. And so, even though the watcher, the real outsider, is the one looking over into another group's experience, it is they who wield the power by constructing a narrative that is based on the differences of the other.

The act of "othering" can be found hard at work behind many examples of inequality through various layers of society. A social group or class often acts as the watcher by perceiving (or not perceiving at all and simply assuming) their particular experience to be the common or "best" experience. Whoever does not fit into their parameters, be it because of race, religion, practices, or social status, is viewed through the keyhole and labeled as the "other." The narrative that is borne out of this process is not only accepted among like-minded people, but it can also reach the point of being assimilated by the observed group. Cultural operators work within every fabric of society and, in many of the cases, these narratives are inhabited by individuals within a social boundary without even noticing. Those who become conscious of the constructed narratives acquire the role of deconstructors due to their capacity of recognizing the fictions that surround them and the supposed other.

By the mid-sixties, the discussion of race in the United States had been plagued by violent riots that were widely televised across the nation. This resulted in even more narratives from outside perspectives that depended on how each evaluated the situation. And it was from this sea of narratives that the Marvel authors made use of characteristics that they perceived to be



**Fig. 16.** Watts riot and illustrated slum (Lee and Kirby, *Fantastic Four* #45, page 8) inherent of their society's "other" to create new character-metaphors. Project housing, ghettos, and social exclusion stood out mostly for their visual components and it is precisely in this environment, in a run-down and margined urban sector, where we find our first group of characters: the Inhumans.

The first appearance of the Inhumans as a group is found in *Fantastic Four* #45 dated December 1965 (two months after the Watts riots), in a story aptly titled "Among Us Hide... The Inhumans!" From the beginning, we immediately sense an act of "othering" as the title implies that something that walks among us and that presumably looks like us is not *exactly* like us. In the story, the Human Torch goes for a walk after a couple of frustrated adventures and suddenly finds himself in a "slum neighborhood that's gonna be torn down for a new housing development" (Lee and Kirby 8). The panel illustration portrays the setting as a run-down urban area complete with street shops and brick buildings with fire escapes —the splitting image of the real environment in which the Watts riots had taken place (see Figure 16, above).

Furthermore, the fact that Torch also mentions the fate of the neighborhood acknowledges a debate that was held during the fifties and the early sixties on the commercial renovation of low-income zones. According to sociologist Sharon Zukin in her 1982 book *Loft Living*, “urban improvement” was commonly used against low-income neighborhoods to control or even disperse minorities and eventually played a role in the larger uprising that followed:

In America’s inner cities, the wholesale destruction of tenements for the sake of urban renewal during the fifties and early sixties gave rise to protest and backlash. Some people blamed the destabilization of low-rent ghetto communities, in part, for the riots of the mid- to late sixties (59).

As the story progresses, the Human Torch notices a lonely Inhuman girl amidst all the rubble and tries to capture her attention. After a couple of failed attempts, he finally succeeds and furthers the establishing of an “other” by telling her “This is no neighborhood for a girl like you!” (Lee and Kirby 11). The girl, who was white, did not “fit” with the physical surroundings that she was found in. In this respect, it must be noted that the Inhuman race did not share the factor of skin color with the real-world’s marginated groups. Nevertheless, the authors kept working to weave a racial narrative into the story.

Regardless of the Marvel author’s intentions, the Inhuman’s metaphor for a minority’s experience was riddled with misconceptions. While the rest of issue #45 is reduced to action scenes, it is in issue #46 (January 1966) that we are able to clearly see some of the flaws. After an intense battle in which they fend off both the Fantastic Four and another assailant, Reed Richards notices that his group’s presence in the ordeal is being misunderstood: “It’s amazing!

They refer to us as though **we're** the evil ones-- as though **we're** the ones that pose a threat! (Lee and Kirby 13). The sensation behind Richard's dialogue is a metaphor for those who viewed police presence in inner-city neighborhoods as a good thing. Those who ascribed to this train of thought, which usually belongs to a conservative ideology, could not comprehend why the citizens of "troubled" urban sectors could reject police presence or any form of authority for that matter. The Marvel Bullpen's lack of understanding for the "other's" experience is represented in Reed Richards, who knew nothing of the Inhumans or their history before that very moment. In a similar manner, many Americans were not aware of the plight of minority groups until street violence and political narratives forced them to come into contact with it, allowing for a number of harsh and unrealistic opinions. Ultimately, the reader of the story could infer that the Inhumans' actions and eventual disappearance from the fight meant that they were protecting themselves by keeping their distance from the rest of the world, a method which the nation's African Americans had resorted to.

Finally, in issue #47 (February 1966), we learn that the Inhumans were a race of super-powered beings who had been driven out of society long ago for being different. They now lived segregated in a far-away land called the Refuge and, like any other social group, they also had their own hierarchy. Blackbolt, their leader, had relegated his power to his brother, Maximus, while he and some members were away. But upon returning, it was revealed that Maximus did not plan on returning the ruling position to Blackbolt and had other plans instead. The dispute between the two brothers is one that

resembles a dispute that had been raging on within the African American community during the same time the book was published. Blackbolt lead the Inhumans in a pacifist manner and was contempt with living under the radar, while Maximus wished to round the Inhumans and wreck revenge on those responsible for the discrimination and eventual exclusion of his race (17). The impressions of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, two Civil Rights leaders with different methods, come to mind as these two characters of the same —albeit fictional— race waged their different means to a similar cause.

The conflict of the story comes to a screeching halt and is given a questionable resolution in issue #48 (March 1966). After Maximus fires a weapon that was intended to target all the humans in the planet, he notices that it had no lasting effect on the human race. One of the Inhumans, Medusa, explains that the reason for the weapon not functioning properly was due to the fact that there was no real distinguishing trait between humans and Inhumans: “We are not the natural enemies of the human race! We are **not** Inhuman! We are **the same as they!!**” (4). One can understand, given the possible interpretation of the Inhumans as a metaphor for minority groups, how this resolution can be problematic. In essence, it implies that the actual divide and angst comes from the oppressors and completely undermines the problem of prejudice. This was and still is a common misconception among people who belong to a privileged experience and cannot identify themselves with the “other.” While Stan Lee may have boasted about the Marvel bullpen’s “liberal”-leaning views, racial inequality was not something they could just learn from reading a book or watching the eleven o’ clock news telecast.

As subsequent *Fantastic Four* issues went on, the Inhumans saw fewer appearances and, when they finally did appear, the narrative moved away from inequality to matters concerning their internal hierarchy. But whereas the Inhumans began their Marvel tenure with racial undertones and ended up somewhat distanced from it all, another team of super-powered beings, the X-Men, did exactly the opposite. The mutant narrative presented by *X-Men* began with subtle racial allegories and acquired more sub themes as time went on, resulting in one of the strongest —though still problematic— metaphors for “otherness” or marginalized groups in the Marvel continuity to this day.

Continuing our introductory analysis from chapter one, the X-Men made their debut in *Uncanny X-Men* #1 (September 1963) and established their mission statement from the get-go. During a conversation with a new female student, professor Charles Xavier explains that he built the school as a means to protect mutants (people with special abilities) from discrimination: “But when I was young, normal people feared me, distrusted me! I realized the human race is not yet ready to **accept** those with extra powers! So I decided to build a haven... a school for **X-Men!**” (Lee and Kirby 10). The theme of discrimination and mistrust due to differences with a dominant experience is made evident once again, but in this case, the professor willingly segregated his own kind just as the Inhumans had done. By being isolated, the professor believed that mutants could develop their special abilities and use them to help regular humans, earning their trust along the way. Furthermore, he explains how there are other mutants who do not agree with his philosophy and opt for a more violent approach. Magneto, the series’ main antagonist, is a mutant

who lost faith in humans ever changing their excluding ways and believes in the supremacy of his peers, or how he calls them, “homo superior” (11). The overall narrative presented in the first *X-Men* book can thus be seen as yet another metaphor for the “pacifist versus militant activism” debate that was happening within the African American community. It has long been rumored that these two characters were based on the figures of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., though no concrete evidence that supports the idea has ever surfaced. Nevertheless, the language of inequality in the book and the belief that the oppressed group should seek supremacy over the oppressor resonate with the teachings of black nationalism and the Nation of Islam that were made famous by Malcolm X in the fifties and early sixties.

As with the Inhumans, the fact that the Marvel author’s experience could not relate with that of the “other” affected how the angles of the narratives were portrayed. On more than one occasion, we witness the X-Men repeating the mantra of “we’re no different from ordinary homo sapiens!” (Lee and Kirby, *X-Men* #6 2) as a way to evade any in-depth discussion about racial divide. And just as with the Inhumans, it presents a problem when we understand the X-Men as a metaphor for real-world minority groups. Psychology professor Mikhail Lyubansky, who wrote an essay titled “Prejudice Lessons from the Xavier Institute,” views the act of transferring public image responsibility to the “other” as nothing less than another form for oppression itself:

Under these circumstances, placing the burden of peace and tolerance on the oppressed group can be itself a subtle form of oppression; for, this expectation blames the victimized for their own victimization.

Thus, while it is reasonable to expect super-powered mutants to make accommodations in order to fit into mainstream society, this expectation becomes increasingly less reasonable the less power an oppressed group enjoys *vis-à-vis* mainstream society (Lyubansky 85).

It is very important to highlight how Lyubansky traces a line between what could be accepted in a fictional narrative from how it actually transcends or could transcend in the real world. These metaphors might still have worked within their own fictional narrative, but as one makes the analogies and applies their narratives into a real-world scenario, the act would suppose an unrealistic or even oppressive stance. Lyubansky adds that the idea would fall in line with other victim-blaming practices found in our society such as blaming sexual assault victims for the clothing they wear or suggesting that homosexuals just live life differently (86). Other inaccuracies within the X-Men metaphor that Lyubansky's essay also tackles are the problems of equating Charles Xavier and Magneto to Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X; and the question of how oppressed can a super-powered race actually be if being oppressed implies powerlessness. But while we accept the conclusions within the angle of his research, for us, the fact that the metaphors do not hold up entirely to their sources do not mean that they failed as representations. In fact, they are still very much valid once the phenomena known as *depoliticized* speech from mythological narratives is taken into consideration.

On the macro perspective, the X-Men do seem like a stand-in for many situations regarding race and oppression from the sixties, but once the representations are placed under scrutiny, most if not all the comparisons fall flat. The reason behind this is that, regardless of the disconnect between the



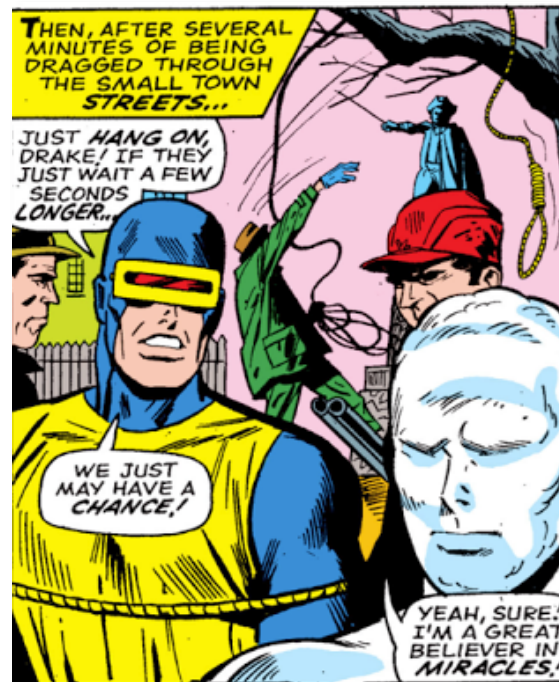


Fig. 17. Mutant lynchings (Friedrich, et. al., *Uncanny X-Men* #46, page 18)

authors and the experiences they portrayed, the representations were built using *depoliticized* speech: the act which extricates all nuances from reality and leaves just an impression of the original source. Professor Charles Xavier does not need to fill every single criteria presented by the figure of Martin Luther King Jr. in order to be a metaphor of him. By just being a character that stands for pacifist methods in a conflict involving race, he is accomplishing his role as a symbol of Martin Luther King Jr. just like Magneto represents the darker side of the ideological battle that correlates to Malcolm X in this context. Once *depoliticized* language is recognized as an intrinsic element of the Marvel storytelling and, most importantly, metaphorical storytelling, then we can move on to accept these fictional portrayals as echoes of a reality no matter how watered-down or faded they may be.

*Depoliticized* speech can also take on whole narratives. For example, after a number of issues trying to appease regular humans by catering to their

needs, the X-Men hit a roadblock in issue #14 (November 1965) when an anthropologist by the name of Bolivar Trask publicly declares mutants a menace to human kind: “**Mutants** walk among us! Hidden! Unknown! Waiting--! --Waiting for their moment to **strike!** (Lee, et. al. 3). Immediately after the declaration, the media and the government seek to chastise mutants by spreading rumors and passing legislation against them. To our knowledge, an exact event that parallels this situation has not occurred in our modern history. Yet, the idea that a person, supported by government measures, would go after a group for their ideology had definitely occurred as recent as in the 1950s. The red scare purported by senator Joseph McCarthy and the communist witch hunt that ensued was still fresh enough in people’s collective memory to remind them of the dangers of extremism. Furthermore, the mistrust placed on African Americans in the U.S. after the abolition of slavery that manifested through abuse and segregation laws also resonate with the public reaction after Trask condemned mutants. Therefore, by *depoliticizing* both the McCarthy account of the fifties and the historic intricacies of black America, the Marvel authors created a narrative “umbrella” under which many other metaphors for “otherness” could be inserted while still representing their historically-approximate “other.” In this manner, Trask, the anti-mutant legislation, and the sentinels he introduced —state police comprised of robots — could stand in as metaphors for police brutality, Jim Crow laws, and the people who support them, just as they could also serve as metaphors for anti-gay laws and oppressive beliefs that trickle down from the highest pillars of authority.

To this day, the X-Men narrative still sports the subject of persecution in all their forms and adaptations. No matter what they do to redeem the image of mutants in the eyes of humankind, they will still be looked as a menace to everyone. In our real world, countless “others” have come and gone. X-Men writers just need to adjust the physical setting to a more contemporary one in order to make a compelling story. The characters may also vary, depending on their unique stories, but the overall metaphor still stands strong. As long as there is inequality and the need for a society to create an “other,” there will be X-Men for a long time.

### *2.9. J.J. Jameson and the Establishment: Web of Lies*

As a result of the numerous public happenings in the sixties such as the Kennedy assassination, civil unrest, and the unpopular Vietnam involvement, the citizens of the U.S. became very weary of their highest body of authority: the federal government. Many —especially the youth— felt that the country’s leaders lacked the capacity to do the “right thing” when faced with contemporary challenges and, consequently, suspected high establishment figures of spreading false information in order to manipulate narratives. In addition, the amount of activists and students protesting segregation or the war evidenced the fact that an official stance on a certain topic did not correlate having full support of the citizenry. This resulted in a large divide between public and official opinions. According to a study by the University of Michigan’s Arthur H. Miller titled “Political Issues and Trust in Government: 1964-1970,” the year 1964 marks the beginning of “...a strong trend of

increasing political cynicism for the general population” (952). Information had become a tool that those in power could wield to push arguments and narratives based on a predetermined bias. As the decade neared its end, more and more people became weary of establishment voices who purported a version of events related to war, crime, politics, and more, that was not in tune with what the rest of the nation saw or felt on everyday basis.

In the Marvel comics universe, such informational distrust and malice became manifested in the figure of J. Jonah Jameson, publisher of the Daily Bugle newspaper in *The Amazing Spider-Man*. More of a comedic relief than serious commentary, Jameson fed into all the suspicions of the public: he always served his agenda regardless of the facts; he omitted information if it did not help to further his opinion; and he distorted situations to make them fit his angle at the moment.

Jameson’s first known vendetta was against Spider-Man. The Bugle publisher sought to degrade Spider-Man’s image by twisting facts and making it seem that the web slinger was actually in cahoots with some of the also then-new villains. In *The Amazing Spider-Man* issue #9 (February 1964), Jameson printed a headline that stated that Spider-Man and the evil mastermind Electro were the same person. The public, illustrated in the page reacting to the headline, blurted lines such as: “**Holy smoke!** Do you think the Bugle’s accusation is **true??**” To which another reader replied: “It **must** be! How could they print it if it **weren’t** true?!! (Lee and Ditko 8). The presence of a gullible audience was key in portraying how easily manipulated public opinion about any subject could be. Before the headline, the public consensus

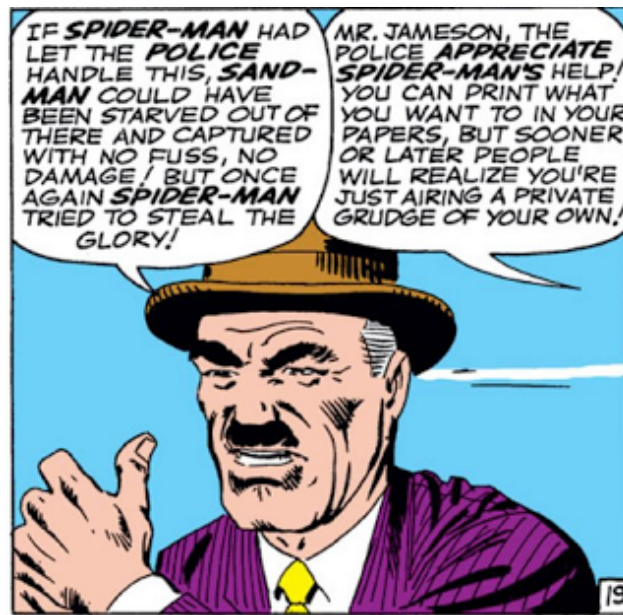


Fig. 18. J. Jonah Jameson (Lee and Ditko, *The Amazing Spider-Man* #4, page 19)

on Spider-Man had been based on his deeds and had been positive. But now that someone printed otherwise, the previous conclusions must have been wrong. Traditional beliefs of yesteryear would advise to believe what was printed on the paper because of certain preconceived values, but those who read the comic were learning—in an unorthodox fashion—how every story has more than one side and how the final account may have nothing to do with what actually happened.

A couple of pages later, in the same issue, Jameson prints yet another headline accusing Spider-Man of foul play. But when a male reader disagrees with the editorial by stating the facts, an elderly woman that is still not convinced by the man's argument insists on believing the paper, "Mr. Jameson wouldn't print it if it weren't **true!**," while a younger-looking woman leaves space for doubt, "But he could make a **mistake!** (11).

The age difference among the illustrated newspaper readers, although not clearly stated in the book and left for the readers to infer by their physical

appearance, shines light on the ideological differences of the sixties. The decade's counterculture movement that questioned everything that the previous generations had ever stood for is present in the aforementioned exchange. Moreover, the fact that Peter Parker (Spider-Man) worked for Jameson acted out the ideological dissonance brought about by generational difference in almost every issue. Whenever they would exchange words, Jameson would often comment on his perspective on the youth of his time: "You teen-agers are all alike --you think the world owes you a living!" (Lee and Ditko, *TASM* #4 9). In this manner, Parker reflected some of the social anxieties and worries of the younger generation even though he did not openly support any political agenda, while the much-hated establishment was embodied in Jameson.

Scenarios like the one in issue #9 became a common staple in *The Amazing Spider-Man* book throughout the decade. But other more scarce and more personal moments that explored different perspectives from within the battle of information also surfaced. Such was the case of issue #10 (March 1964) when Parker went to Mr. Foswell, one of the Daily Bugle's reporters, to ask him if he truly believed in the things that Jameson told him to write in the paper. Foswell's response basically alluded to just following orders and avoiding problems with the authority: "Look, son. I write what Jameson tells me to! **He's** the boss here! (Lee and Ditko 12). Whenever ideologies face off in public or even in private sectors, there will always be those who prefer to stay quiet in order to avoid trouble, particularly when violence and disobedience are involved. For the activists of the sixties, keeping silent or

complying with the authority just made you complicit of whatever crime was being committed. Mr. Foswell represents those from previous generations who kept about their duties as long as what was happening around them did not affect them directly. Peter Parker, being a passive-minded figure himself, did not beat Foswell over the head with any propaganda nor did he give a speech on the importance the truth, but he did walk away uttering: “But it sure seems unfair!” (12).

After many attempts —some with a certain degree of success— at tarnishing Spider-Man’s reputation, Jameson finally got his hands dirty and began funding “questionable” projects to accomplish his mission. In issue #20 (January 1965), he hired Dr. Farley Stillwell, a scientist who could mutate human with animal genes, to make a new experiment that could take down Spider-Man. The deal resulted in the super villain known as The Scorpion, who later became a well-known member of Spider-Man’s rogues gallery. Later, in issue #25 (June 1965), we see Jameson being approached by a scientist who built a robot with the capacity to defeat Spider-Man. Though reluctant at first, Jameson agreed to use the machine after seeing it in action. Both of these scenarios allude to a high body of authority acting directly on their personal interests. A real-life parallel can be found in the own U.S. government’s involvement in Vietnam. At first, the U.S. had resorted to low-intensity advising and strategic propaganda (information) in the region. Then, after not obtaining the expected results, the strategy became more direct and destructive. The U.S. government funneled more money and more troop effort into their interests in the region, just as Jameson moved from biased

newspaper editorials to funding super criminals. Furthermore, the Scorpion's eventual career as a villain could symbolize the real "investment" a nation makes when waging an ideological war, particularly after looking how the Vietnam conflict played out in hindsight. Just as we have seen with the recent war in the Middle East, the direct measures in Vietnam actually begat more extremists enemies instead of creating allies. Lastly, the use of a remote-controlled robot to fight bears resemblance to how the Vietnam war was waged by proxy, as the northern and southern parts of the region were being moved at a distance by the world's leading superpowers: Russia and the United States.

### *2.10. Closing*

The thought process behind metaphors should play a more centric role in the study of language and fiction. Much can still be said about the linguistic processes that lead authors to choose the particular symbols to represent the totality of an experience or ideal. The interpretations brought about these character-metaphors are due to them working in analogies, narratives that involve a transcendental meaning. Cultural factors are always present, but when the chosen medium for the message itself contains a list of established constructs, one can only imagine how much of the metaphor-making process involved keeping with cultural nuances and how much was the product of innovation.

To tackle both these aspects, research must include two forms to tackle these lines: the cultural and innovative construction of metaphors. The



first, the cultural angle, focuses on a particular medium and its traditional use of metaphors —if there is a particular metaphor associated to the medium and how it came to be. In our case, the North American comic book tradition had established the superhero metaphor as a staple early in the twentieth century. The archetype could be adapted to reflect any group experience as long as it included a number of narrative and physical characteristics. The creation of the first superhero metaphor had its particular reasons that allowed for it to exist, but a similar process was and is replicated each time a new superhero is made to represent a different experience in history. Therefore, even though the context of the source superhero metaphor stays behind in the events that lead its creation, it is still made relevant in the subsequent adaptations and innovations by a tradition.

The second, the innovative aspect, focuses on the particular events that lead to the the creation of certain metaphors even long after the archetype has been established. This would respond to more immediate stimuli in the creator's immediate surroundings and would also include how they borrowed from existing character-metaphors to propose something relatively new. Umberto Eco's outline on how to innovate on a preexisting metaphor is key in driving this part of the analysis, yet the elements that make up the new one will always differ as no two authors ever have the exact influences.

Today, the Marvel metaphors have become an indispensable part of U.S. culture. During a July 20, 2016 episode of the *NPR Politics Podcast*, editor and commentator Ron Elving, when speaking about the controversies surrounding the then-Republican presidential nominee Donald J. Trump, joked

that “I’m gonna try not to go to Marvel comics for any parallel or metaphor” (Sanders, et. al.). For many, this is the way cultural personas or social events are cemented in history: when Marvel creates a metaphor for them in their universe. This form of storytelling, which mirrors contemporary events, is said to have changed the comic book medium’s history. Many historians look back at Marvel’s beginning in the sixties as the day the industry changed forever. But as we have seen, the revolution did not sprout from a void. Superheroes had been created previously and Marvel just innovated over them. Still, it would be a prosperous venture to study how have other creators innovated on Marvel’s metaphor since then.

Metaphors have been a part of language and its use for so long that many do not view them as special recourses. In a world dominated by entertainment industries and mass culture, they have been reduced to the realms of mere fantasy or child’s play. We must return to view metaphors as the classical scholars viewed them: as heirs of century-long traditions filled with cultural intricacies and historic substance. This is not to say that all metaphors are made with the purpose of outlasting time. As we saw in this chapter, metaphors can serve a number of external purposes and if they are made for the sake of entertainment, then they are destined for “finite” results. Nevertheless, some will —either on purpose or by chance— fill the requirements to become part of the mythological pantheon, but for a new generation— and these are the ones we need to be looking out for.

## Chapter 3: Translatability

El ser humano traduce porque es un ser finito pero con deseos infinitos; traduce porque dispone, al mismo tiempo, de una ubicación concreta y móvil (espacio y tiempo) y de libertad; traduce porque, a pesar de la presencia constante de la muerte, está poseído por el deseo inextinguible de empezar siempre de nuevo: traducir es nacer de nuevo, es, como quería el rabí Nahman de Braslav, negarse a ser viejo.

-Lluís Duch

[The human being translates because it is a finite being with infinite wishes; because it makes use, simultaneously, of a static and constant-moving location (space and time) and of liberty; because it is possessed by the inextinguishable desire to always begin anew regardless of death's constant presence. Translation is to be born again. It is, as rabbi Nachman of Breslov wished, to deny old age]

-Lluís Duch (author's translation)

### *3.1. A Regenerative Language*

One may joke that, due to the high frequency of god-like beings in comic book metaphorical narratives, the stories themselves have become somewhat “super” or immortal in the process. These have survived decades of transformations by being adapted to new contexts and new storytelling techniques that have come with the progress of time. Each manifestation has added new information to an established mythos and has also been often further conditioned by the medium in which it is delivered: movies, video games, animated series, and other emergent forms of entertainment offer new possibilities to expand the narratives as the mediums through which they are

delivered get better acquainted with the masses. The result is a large number of unending stories that carry over their essence long after their initial contextual significance has drifted away into history. This is possible due to the language components of the superhero narrative being “renewable” to a certain extent. If we were to trace this regenerative characteristic throughout the history of storytelling, we would notice that the foundations of the classical myths also included a renewable factor in their structure. These narratives and the literary traditions that perpetuated them borrowed from previous stories to progress their own and thus establish a common pattern found in storytelling

The idea of an ever-evolving metaphorical narrative should not come as surprise. As we saw in the previous chapter, language and myth hold a symbiotic relationship in their development and it is only then natural that they also keep this mutual relationship as they evolve. Narratives can be rewritten a number of times without the source ever being discarded from the memory of its consumers. Halls-Bascom Professor of Classics Emeritus Barry B. Powell states that metaphorical narratives gradually change over time depending on the whim of an author. Through an example of the Greek poet Pindar, he presents the susceptibility of a narrative and the power of rewriting it by adding new language:

The purpose of Greek poetry was to delight and entertain, as Homer tells us several times, but Pindar also had a moral, or religious, purpose. He wished to improve on the immoral and unedifying tales reported in the *epea* of Homer and other poets ... Pindar does not like this old story [myth about Pelops], thinks it false, and intends to reform its immoral content in his poem *Olympian 1* (5).

Pindar's contribution to metaphorical narratives came about his rewriting of the Pelops story. He added a sense of moral and, in the process, altered the language of the source, resulting in a modified version of the account. Since the re-written story kept the essence of the source narrative, the act results in the expansion of the narrative and not in the substitution of it. The audience can then consume the "renewed" version, just as we consume a new word that enters the lexicon, and either allow or deny this new form to form part of the larger nomenclature.

The act of adding or subtracting content from a narrative thus emerges from a *necessity* to rewrite or retell a story. Both of these paths are driven by whatever finality the creator aims to accomplish. A storyteller may modify a myth in order to please their own interest (like Pindar) or to please the desires of a target audience (like in the festivals). Each course includes its own set of guidelines that serve as outlines to which the storyteller must adhere to while reworking an account. The first, the pleasing of self, does not usually exert a lasting effect on the larger mythos since it is intended for a smaller, more intimate audience. For this reason, this type of modified account does not reach far into the depths of society that would allow it to set its roots in a culture's collective memory. On the other hand, the second, pleasing a target audience, can elevate the retelling of a myth into equal myth-status by appealing to more socially desired or widespread topics. In this respect, the rewritten version is appropriated by the social group that consumes it and helps it fulfill the requirements for any myth as established by Roland Barthes

in *Mythologies* (110). The final product would exist as a continuation of the larger narrative by means of both literary and cultural expansion.

Since a source text may be tied to a particular context, the translator must “update” its language in order to make it relevant for the new audience. This is realized through a number of processes such as localization: the act of finding equivalencies that reflect the realities of the context to which it is being translated. Anything from the exchange of words that either stopped being relevant or were never relevant in the new context to narrative elements that may resound better with the new target audience (settings, references, etc.) are considered in this procedure. The job of a translator is to keep up with the changes brought about time displacement or cultural differences and negotiate their substitutions when an occasion calls for it.

Myths, as language, are also translated by similar means as any other work of language. Yet, contrary to certain subsets such as literary translations, a mythological narrative’s translation does not require the same level of intricacy in its form. According to Terrence Hawkes, the focus of a mythological translation lies beyond the words of the text; therefore, its renewing process does not rely heavily on just the external aspect: “Unlike poetry, myth does not suffer by ‘translation’: the poorest linguistic rendition of the events in the story is adequate to transmit the ‘mythical value’ of the myth” (43). In other words, a translator of mythological narratives need not worry about register, word equivalence, or any other detail pertaining to a language’s idiosyncrasies. What truly matters in a myth translation are the parts that carry the story’s substance or meaning: “What happened?,” “Why

did it happen?,” and “What lesson did we learn?” These questions handle the “mythical value” or essence of the account. The underlying message, what distinguishes a myth from other accounts in the same tradition, is what must be passed on to the new version rather than the words that were used to tell it. Names, settings, or even the sequence of events can be modified as long as the idea can be pointed out from the whole and, in that respect, the myth translation would achieve its purpose.

Another reason why myths are relatively simple to translate is because they portray situations that serve as umbrellas for the experiences of many. A classical hero’s battle for love, for his kind, or his desire for vengeance all deal with emotions very well known to any of us. Linguist Paul Friedrich explains that these “universal” themes also extend beyond the realm of the real-emotional into the world of the subconscious and beyond:

Myths are translatable partly because they are about universals of experience: biologically, they often involve rudimentary functions or the basic anatomy (the point of departure for so many symbolisms); socially, the family, with its need for cooperation and its ambivalences; emotionally, they play on empathy, curiosity, jealousy, antipathy, hatred, identification, lust, fear, loneliness; they depict imaginative experiences of dream, daydream, heightened consciousness, memory, hope, forgetting, sudden realization (38).

Though Friedrich later recognizes another aspect of myth which centers around the relationship between the theme and its context (making certain experiences appear exclusive to certain cultures), he assures us that it is not a matter of meaning but rather of form (38). The challenges presented in the translation of a myth would be similar to the challenges that arise when translating poetry. The same could be said of the superhero who, as we



discussed, came from and reflected a North American experience. Yet, for all its seeming cultural constraints, it did not take long for other cultures to adapt the superhero to reflect their own culture and context (Shaktimaan from India, *Black Lightning* from Russia, *The 99* in the Middle East, and so on). Whether they are as recognized as their U.S. counterparts depends on where one looks for their respective mythological material.

With this in mind, we can begin to understand the many instances where we have either seen or read a story and, somewhere in the middle, said to ourselves: “This seems familiar” or “I knew it would happen!” The meanings behind myths have been retold, repackaged, or translated for many purposes for centuries. Structures have found their way into much of the fiction we consume in our daily lives and we can distinguish them without having to earn a doctorate in mythical studies. Because of the subconscious presence of heroic narratives, Hawkes synthesizes Tzvetan Todorov’s stance regarding a storyteller’s experience as follows: “All writing takes place in the light of other writing, and represents a response to the ‘world’ of writing that pre-exists...” (101). This is certainly the case of myths either written or rewritten. They progress and regenerate by means of language. When a storyteller adapts a myth to make it more appealing for a new audience, what they do in reality is simply either add or subtract language. From the story’s perspective, it is regenerating because it morphs into something different while retaining the central value of its source. From the authors perspective, it is something else. Not only does a translation take on the essence from ancient myths, but the mere act of writing (or rewriting) is a response, a continuation

of the dialogue with an established literary tradition and practice that has been centuries in play. The common denominator in both acts is language because, as it has been made evident: wherever there is language, there is also myth.

### *3.2. Consumer-Driven Mythologies*

Our modern society relies on a high amount of outlets whose purpose serve to entertain the masses. These often perpetuate mythical narratives by either creating new or presenting renewed versions to ever-changing generations of audiences. One of these channels is the comic book industry that handles the superhero trope. Since both the superhero figure and the comic book as an entertainment medium rose to prominence at the same time, one can argue that their development through history has also been symbiotic. The cultural status of the superhero would not have been achieved so easily had it not been for the comic book's serialized format and the comic book would not have become a household name had it not been because of the superhero. In general, it was the industry's steady production of stories what helped cement the superhero's stance in popular culture and the factor that continues to grant them life to this day. Thus, what we witness in the comic book industry and its hero's relatively short history is a trajectory similar to that in which classical heroes were introduced, developed, and ascended cultural barriers, but in a matter of decades instead of centuries.

As with all other forms of entertainment, the focus lies on the product: the thing that must be delivered continuously in order to satisfy a demand. In

the case of superheroes, this “product” would be the stories rather than the characters themselves because that is how they acquire meaning after being introduced. Shortly after the first superhero book was printed, the comic book industry began to systematically produce narratives in order to meet their deadlines which coincided with a rise in demand for the product. Economic arguments aside, this resulted in the rapid creation of a backlog of stories (mythologies) for any given superhero who acquired meaning —and reinterpretations— at a faster rate than classical heroes. In *Language and Myth*, Ernst Cassirer alludes to this sort of environment (one that requires a constant flow of stories) as a perfect ground for regenerative language:

[...] there is one intellectual realm in which the word not only preserves its original creative power, but is ever renewing it; in which it undergoes a sort of constant palingenesis, at once a sensuous and a spiritual reincarnation. This regeneration is achieved as language becomes an avenue of artistic expression (98).

Language, in Cassirer’s work, is homologous to myth in its foundations and functionality. We can substitute “word” and “language” from the quote above with “myth” and “myth-making” respectively, and we would have a better-suited statement for our case. Once myth becomes an “avenue for artistic expression” as it did in the case of Pindar rewriting the Pelops story and as it does with most modern intellectual properties, a system is put in charge of creating and regenerating stories for mythical characters. The superhero’s equivalent of Pindar’s rewriting is then the comic book business that eternally seeks authors to pen new adventures for them and, simultaneously, give them new meanings as contexts and circumstances change. Once the product is

delivered, it is up to the readers to consume the material and decide its fate regarding the larger mythology of the character.

The role of the consumer is of utmost importance in regards to the acceptance of narratives for any mythology. Their individual-but-somehow-collective decisions serve as an “invisible hand”<sup>2</sup> that leans towards which stories to appropriate and which ones to forget. In the age of social media, consumers have taken a much active role in the shaping of the final product, going as far as to coerce creative teams to modify their work (Sandy Schaefer). Yet in the past, before the availability of social media, the relationship between consumer and creator was still decisive despite the technological disadvantages.

Let us visit a case that occurred with the *Transformers* franchise as example of consumer-shaped modern mythologies. We recognize that, while the robots in disguise may not necessarily fit into the definition of a “superhero” for some (something debatable), they have indeed shared a similar myth-building methodology with superheroes ever since their introduction and therefore sit among them in the pantheon of modern mythologies. According to Jason Bainbridge in an essay titled “Transformers: The Movie - Making Modern Mythology the Marvel Way,” before the toy line was launched, Hasbro —the company behind the *Transformers*— contracted

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<sup>2</sup> In economics, the term “invisible hand” was coined by Adam Smith, father of the free market economic theory, and was used to describe the larger consequences of individual actions in regards to income distribution and production. Smith believed that widespread economic trends were subject to the decisions of ordinary people who, unknowingly, coincided in what should be a standard in consumption and production. Thus, the collective social whole benefited by the movement of this invisible hand which tilted wherever the common man’s interest lay.

Marvel to employ their “marketing scheme” which included comics and an animated series in addition to the main toy line (30). The formula, which had proved successful for Marvel characters and mythologies in the past, had also been applied to the *Star Wars* franchise and to Hasbro’s very own *G.I. Joe* toy line to great results. Thus, Marvel had become both a reference point and a distributor for the modern myth-making system following the success of their superheroes.

But this is where the similarities between superheroes and Transformers end—or so the people at Hasbro thought. Since their end goal, their product, was the sale of action figures rather than stories, they did not think twice about the mythology when it came time to introduce and eliminate characters shortly after their arrival. This brought about problems with consumers when *Transformers: The Movie* (1986), their first animated feature, hit theaters nationwide. In the film, many of the characters that people had come to love were killed off in the first act, leaving the resolution of the plot to a cast of newcomers. The decision to eliminate them, according to Bainbridge, was motivated by a purely economic mindset: “*TTM* [*Transformers: The Movie*] literally killed off characters from the 1984/85 toy lines as these toys were being phased out of retail assortments in favor of all-new characters” (28). And a result, the movie was not received well. In addition to underperforming at the box office, *the movie* left a bittersweet taste in the mouth of *Transformers* consumers that still debate its decisions to this day. Luckily, fearing permanent backlash from the fans, the creators scrambled

to fix the mistake and managed to avoid another Hasbro license from falling into the same trap:

According to the *TTM* Special Edition DVD Commentary by Chris McFeely, many children [...] were reportedly deeply distressed when Optimus Prime (not to mention characters such as Ironside, Brawn, Prowl, Ratchet, Wheeljack, Bluestreak, and Starscream) were killed, leading to Prime's return in Series Three of the cartoon (which was set after the events of *TTM*). A similar plan to kill a heroic leader Duke in the *G.I. Joe* movie (that had been in development before *TTM* but was released straight to video thanks to *TTM*'s poor box office returns) was also squashed in post-production as a result of the negative feedback (29).

What the Hasbro executives failed to understand was that, after giving the *Transformers* a “mythological treatment” by means of Marvel, they stopped being in possession of a mere toy line. The consumers —children AND adults, combined— had appropriated the *Transformers* story in the same way that the Greek culture had appropriated classic mythological heroes and modern-day audiences had appropriated the superhero. They had invested emotions into a group of characters that, they were either not prepared to see change quickly, or simply did not believe the change was justified well enough. Collectively, their concern pushed for a change among the creative teams who amended the decisions by bringing characters back to life (29). If the company had not listened to the consumers, they probably would have lost support from a few followers along the way. But since creators of any entertainment branch are driven by (to a large extent) economic reasons, they long for the acceptance of the consumer. This interdependence is what we believe to be the “invisible hand” in regards to mythological accounts that inhabit our modern culture.

After learning about the *Transformers* episode, one may recall other situations where consumers have not agreed with the path a popular narrative has taken and have “demanded” change. This back and forth between consumer and creator is especially common when dealing with mythologies, and the people at Hasbro learned about it the hard way:

... *TTM*'s marketing failure also points to the franchise's even greater success; children [...] were so distressed because Prime had been so well developed as *a character*. As story consultant Flint Dille explains: “the real answer [as to why we killed Optimus Prime] is that we didn't know he was an icon ... it was a toy show. We just thought we were killing off the old product line and introducing a new product” (29).

The fact that the *Transformers* brand was mainly centered around a physical object (toy line) did not hinder its mythical capacity at all. Roland Barthes would be the first to remind us that “Myth can be defined neither by its object or its material, for any material can arbitrarily be endowed with meaning” (*Mythologies* 110). This is because what gives meaning to objects or materials in general is language, and language had been present in every step of the Marvel marketing scheme through comics, movies, and overall cultural presence. The use of the word “icon” when referencing Optimus Prime's death is another clear-cut reference to the linguistic nature of these narratives and the meanings behind them. The construction and granting of external purpose to an icon or symbol of a mythological narrative is based on the decision to add or subtract language (the *Transformers* movie having subtracted important language from the robot mythology). The creators behind the franchise rectified their unpopular decisions by adding even more language to the narrative with the hopes that it would steer its path back to a place where

consumers would be pleased with the outcome. Whether it is to return to a previous state or move forward into new territory, language is what must pave the road that will lead the story somewhere.

### *3.3. Saussurean Linguistics in the Multiverse*

What allows for multiple narratives of the same stories to coexist? How do consumers cope with the fact that the original intent of the story was to go through another route or that, moreover, an alternative to their version exists? The answers to these questions are the same that explain how a mythological account can have many distinct —often conflicting— versions and still coexist as a somewhat unified whole in the collective memory of consumers. In the superhero world, the plurality of a superhero's story has opened the doors to interesting and thought-provoking interpretations of characters. Despite the existence of these narratives, readers are very much aware that a main or principal track exists. And it is from this default continuity where they draw the general idea of the mythology —keeping it ever present while consuming the contents of the variations. This is possible due to a pair of linguistic concepts that explain how a language can also have its variations while still keeping a principal, unadulterated form.

A language, any language, can have multiple forms. This not only applies to dialects caused by influencing social and contextual factors, but it also considers the registers within a particular social group that may be employed for different uses. Despite the existence of deviations, most users of a particular language are aware that, somewhere along the lines of history or



culture, there is a wider, socially-accepted version of the language. This is called the *langue* and *parole* of a language system. The *langue* stands for the most-known or most-accepted version of a system, while the *parole* are the versions, variations, and modifications that may exist of said *langue* during its everyday use.

In myths, a *langue* may be the original form of a story such as the general Oedipus myth, while the *parole* would be an extension or variation such as *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles (Hawkes 42). In superhero stories, there are multiple layers to this scheme. The first uses the idea of a *parole* to add information to the main myth. For this, we must assume (correctly so) that the first issues of the Marvel revolution are the *langue* for each and every of those character's mythologies. *Parole* as an extension of myth begin to appear as soon as creators revisit the origin story of a character or group. This trope — revisiting a superhero's origin story— is often used to shine light on a different aspect of the character that may have been overlooked the first time around. For example, the Fantastic Four's origin story appears in issue #1 as it was analyzed in the first chapter of this dissertation. Yet, ten issues later, we have another look at the group's beginnings with some slight differences. The story of issue #11 opens with the group receiving some fan mail that inquired about their past. Reed Richards, who “answers” the letter, begins retelling the origin story by giving extra information about how he and Ben Grimm, The Thing, had been friends since college and had lived many experiences together (Lee and Kirby 6). We can come up with a number of reasons for adding this extra page of language that was not in the first published comic. One could be

as innocent as an easy way to keep new readers informed about the group's origins so that no one would feel that they were coming in late to the magazine. But, since we enjoy viewing things from a different angle, we believe that this scene about Reed and Grimm's friendship was also created to add more layers of emotion to their relationship, especially after what had been happening in the stories following the first comic. If we remember, Ben Grimm was the only character whose transformation posed a real obstacle to his normal life. Finding a cure for Grimm became a common plot point on a number of issues between one and ten. Richards' insistence on solving Grimm's predicament felt somewhat hollow until issue #11, when it was finally revealed that they had been friends years prior to the accident and thus Richards felt compelled to help because of an emotional link. The revision of origin and addition of language here serves to give purpose to a character's actions and expand the story through character development. This *parole*, though distanced in content from the source account at first, ends up being integrated to the *langue* as consumers find no conflict with its language and the information that was already established in the first issue.

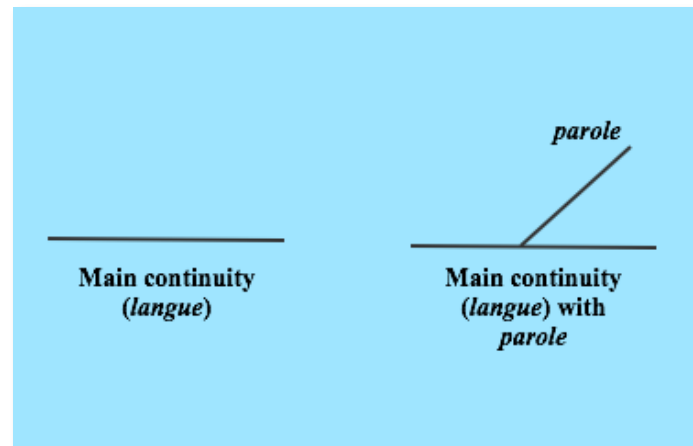
One can even go further as to question whether the authors had even thought about that particular story angle when they began writing the first issue of the book. Revisiting the beginning and adding language grants the creators ability to shift narratives in hindsight; stories can be made to lean towards a direction even after they were made without ulterior motives. It can be done to explain something that has been already happening in stories leading up to that moment or to set up a future event. Some superhero origins

have received countless rewritings by creators depending on the spin they wished to give the character during their contribution (or “run,” as it is said in the comic book culture) to the myth. As long as the added language is justified and does not alter the essence of the main story, then consumers will be quick to accept them. Still, there is another form of the scheme in which a “definite *parole*” can go beyond and change the events of a myth significantly, but nonetheless still feel as part of the same myth. In a world of superheroes, this occurs when we deal with multiverses.

“Multiverse” is a *portmanteau* composed of the words “multiple” and “universe.” It borrows from the theory that there are infinite parallel universes in which we exist with slightly different variations. The idea has served to expand superhero narratives since the Silver Age. While other comic publishers such as DC have dedicated much effort to these other worlds (52 multiverses or versions of every character), the largest example of multiverse recognition in Marvel history is the Ultimate Marvel universe. “Ultimate Marvel” came about the year 2000 when it was decided to update the mythologies for younger generations. The revamped stories were made to be more realistic and include chronologically-relevant (2000s) elements for characters such as Spider-Man, the X-Men, and the Fantastic Four. These versions of the characters live in another “reality” —Earth-1610, to be exact— and are not aware of the main continuity’s existence (until a reality-bending catastrophe occurred, but none of that is relevant for our study). In the *Ultimate Fantastic Four*, for example, a juvenile Ben Grimm went to school with Reed Richards and protected him from school bullies who picked on

Richards for being a “smartmouth” (Bendis, et. al., *Ultimate Fantastic Four* #1 3-4) . This meant that Richards and Grimm had actually met long before their college days as it was established in the main Marvel universe. Then, after a government agent witnesses his potential at a school science fair, Richards is sent to a development project in New York’s Baxter building where he honed his abilities while working for the U.S. government (21). It is here where he meets and presumably studies under the observation of Professor Storm (Sue and Johnny Storm’s father) and Dr. Arthur Molekevic, aka the “Moleman.” (Bendis, et. al., *UFF* #2 3). From there on, the storyline continues with even more modifications: the experiment that gives them their powers was not a space mission nor was it fueled by the desire to beat the Russians, but rather an inter-dimensional gateway that exposed them to otherworldly radiation; Ben Grimm, who was not a part of the research group, is part of the U.S. military and rejoins Richards moments before the experiment; the experiment is first believed to have been sabotaged by Victor Van Damme (Von Doom, from this universe). These deviations from the original version, though somewhat trivial if taken individually, add up to make a considerably different account from the 1961 version. Yet, despite all the modifications, the essence behind the narrative keeps the consumer grounded into understanding it as a Fantastic Four story.

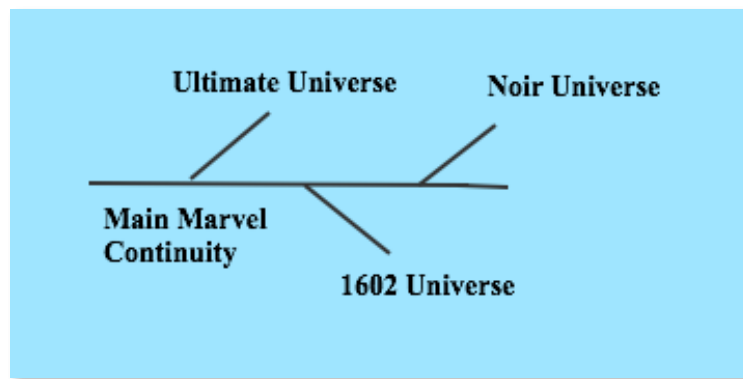
The Ultimate version of the Fantastic Four story is what we determine to be a definite *parole* of a myth. One way we have come to visualize the *langue* and *parole* scheme in superhero mythologies is by using lines to



**Fig. 19.** Visual illustration of *langue-parole* narratives.

represent the path of narrative development (see Figure 19). The first line, the straight line, represents any “main” form of language or myth. *Parole* is represented by lines that take root in a *langue*, but that ultimately point to and develop into another direction. For the overall Fantastic Four mythology, the original 1961 version of the story would be the main line, while the Ultimate version is the one found taking off in its own path. The reason as to why the *parole* has its own course brings about another characteristic of the *langue-parole* narratives, which is that the *parole* requires a main story (*langue*) to prop itself up, but once it launches, it follows a completely different trajectory. Whereas the first *parole* in discussion morphs with the main *langue* to become a single trajectory, this one is intended to continue and develop on its own.

Subsequent adventures of the Ultimate Fantastic Four group would not resemble anything from the original universe except for recurring characters that are essential to the mythology. In fact, the Reed Richards of the Ultimate universe eventually becomes an evil genius bent on the destruction of humanity and even lends a hand in the destruction of his family. The wildly different evolution of the story is valid because they occur in their own



**Fig. 20.** Marvel quantity of *parole*.

universe, in their *parole*. And, as a language or language-derivative, it can make its own set of rules as it progresses.

The *langue* of a myth is not restricted to just one *parole* or offshoot. Any main narrative (or line) of a mythology can have a myriad of derivations. Other universes within the Marvel brand include the 1602 universe, which reimagines “the four from the Fantastick” (Gaiman, et. al., *Marvel 1602* #7 1) and other Marvel characters in an Elizabethan setting; and the Noir series, which reimagines some Marvel heroes as noir or pulp characters. A visual representation of the Marvel *langue* with the entirety of its *parole* would resemble a tree branch (see figure 20) with all the intricate sticks and twigs as subdivisions which only a living organism could manifest. In a way, the comparison of a myth with a living thing (tree branch) is fitting because we do believe that these stories obtain life once they enter the different levels of a culture. Their behavior continues to follow the function of language in that they can evolve into other systems whose only trace of affiliation lies in their ancestry. Moreover, as time continues to move forward, stories that began as *parole* can become the *langue* that give way to more variations. The roots of a *parole* can become obscure with time, leaving the variation to stand on its own

in the memory of the consumers. The result is an unending cycle of *langue-parole* relationships in which the first can be dropped off in order to give way for more alterations.

### 3.4. *The Multiverse as Second-order Semiotic Systems*

There is also a reason that explains how consumers *understand* a mythological narrative that is presented in a different form, and it deals with the aspect of language that searches for the meaning behind a symbol. At the time when the Ultimate Marvel universe was introduced (year 2000), a large number of Marvel characters (including the Fantastic Four) had become icons for milestones both within their fictional universe and in the exterior (“real”) world. They were representatives of the superhero genre, the Marvel revolution, the Space Race, scientific exploration, and more. The narratives or rather, their meanings, hold a steady place in American culture which grants anyone the ability to recognize the stories regardless of alterations to their appearance. This speaks of the universality of mythological narratives and their symbols: a person need not partake in the reading of comic books in order to recognize the characters or a summary of what they are. Mythological accounts achieve universal status after they are placed as or become references for experiences within a society (Kristeva 38). They gradually ascend culture to become lodged in its social fiber as archetypes for narratives. Anything that closely resembles them would still be considered related to or as a derivation of the myth’s transcendental meaning. Therefore, the form or presentation can

and will differ due to the changing of times, but the people's understanding of the core value will remain unmoved for the most part.

Meaning also exhibits this type of relation with words in a language. From a semiotic perspective, words are symbols that represent a given meaning or object. Their correlation is agreed upon by a social group and their correspondence varies by culture or language. Despite their categorical differences, the words "tree" and the Spanish *árbol* represent the same meaning. This may be true at the moment this dissertation is being written, but any of the two can change at any moment. If enough users of English or Spanish begin using another word for "tree" or *árbol*, the new forms could eventually become the standard and the two previous forms would be remembered as archaisms. Similar grounds of meaning and representation can be applied to mythological narratives. A myth is given a form that is relevant to the context in which it is created in and can change on a whim or as a consequence of external stimuli. This brings about the malleability of approaches that exist within the analysis of myths. They can be viewed as the results of historical progress as much as linguistic evolution or other, as Roland Barthes put it: "This is the case with mythology: it is a part both of semiology inasmuch as it is a formal science, and of ideology inasmuch as it is an historical science: it studies ideas-in-form" (112). The ideas-in-form is necessary to understand how appearances of a myth can change while maintaining a meaning. It also characterizes how, since ideas belong to an ever changing flow of things, myths can gain new interpretations by simply inhabiting new forms.



Myths operate in “secondary” levels. This is to say, they require established systems, symbols, or events to germinate: “myth is peculiar in that it invariably functions as a *second-order* semiotic system constructed on the basis of a semiotic chain which exists before it” (Hawkes 131). This fact sheds light on a number of discussions from Chapter 2 such as myth’s “similar-but-not-equal” relationship with language and its proximity to (masking of) the truth. In both cases, language or “the truth” serves as a first-order semiotic system (meaning) while myth dwells in the second step by either representing meaning or distancing the form from it. Regarding the main topic of this chapter, the idea also serves as the basis for the renewal of myths. Once the main account of a myth is established, it stands as the first chain in the level of meaning. Renewal comes as an extension of said chain and is not an exclusive result of time moving forward. As we saw with the comic book industry, the demand for superhero narratives creates an opening for artistic expression that, in turn, also demands variability. Characters are reimagined in different scenarios to satisfy curiosities such as “What would happen if the Fantastic Four had been created in the 1600s?” or “What if the zombie apocalypse happened in the Marvel Universe?” Both of these possibilities include their own set of language, their own visual cues, that can be applied to the main form of a superhero narrative on a secondary level. Similar to the *langue* and *parole* relationship, the modification of a superhero narrative’s main form results in a derivation of the first account. The second form can exist because of the first chain that establishes the rules of the narrative. Therefore, there can be no secondary form if there is no first line of meaning.

The act of transferring a superhero narrative from one semiotic form to a second is an act of translation. Translations are also second-order semiotic productions that stem from first-level sources. Symbols may be different in a translation, but the ultimate purpose is to keep the meaning as close to the source as possible. We must remember that translating is not restricted to the written word, but that it can handle the transference of other language-like systems. In the case of superhero narratives, textual and visual cues are required to translate some of the information, but they are not everything. Purpose or exteriority is required to validate the form's meaning both within and outside the work. Let us take the Marvel 1602 series (and universe) as an example. The book, written by renowned English author Neil Gaiman, imagines the Marvel world in the 17th century of William Shakespeare. The dialogue and narration reflect a sort of colonial English associated with the times. Names of characters were also changed: Charles Xavier from the X-Men became "Carlos Javier," a Spaniard; and Nick Fury was "Sir Nicholas Fury," a knighted Englishman, to name a couple. In addition, physical appearances were made to reflect the esthetics (or an understanding of them) from the epoch. Now, these changes would be the equivalent of translating word for word in a text. They suppose cosmetic alterations to the source without considering how the context would affect the narrative as well. Luckily, Gaiman is versed enough in myths to understand that localization is as important with mythologies as it is when translating a document. Thus, the plot and motivations of the 1602 universe are as relevant to the 1600s as science exploration was to the original Marvel universe in the 1960s. The

1602 story centers around a power struggle between the crowns of England, Spain, Scotland, and the fictional nation of Latveria (which Count Otto Von Doom rules). Historical quarrels between Scotland and England, or Spain and England, are portrayed through an arms race in which each kingdom employs their own form of espionage to obtain a secret weapon from the Templars. Mutant discrimination is also present by way of the Spanish Inquisition's mission to eradicate "demonic" beings from the earth.

The Fantastic Four's origin story was also properly translated. "Sir Richard Reed" is a brilliant explorer who ventured out to the New World in his ship called "the Fantastick" with his captain (Benjamin) and a pair of runaway siblings (the Storm siblings). One day, while sailing the Sargasso sea, the ship began to sail adrift and a mysterious "curtain of light" showered everyone on board. The event resulted in strange mutations for the few crew that remained on the ship and thus they began using their newfound abilities for good (Gaiman et. al., *Marvel 1602* #5 14-15). In this scenario, the desire to explore new lands and hoist flags in the name of a nation supplants the desire to reach space before Russia from the first version. Patriotic or nationalistic fervor is transferred almost verbatim as the characters in the 1602 universe wanted their own countries to succeed in the arms race just as the Fantastic Four wished for their country to succeed in the Space Race. The translation works because it gives a historically-accurate purpose to more than just esthetics and it does so by creating an exteriority for this particular second form of the mythology.

Perhaps the created exterior for the 1602 universe is not entirely accurate if given a thorough analysis, but that does not matter. No amount of

research can replicate what it would exactly be like to create an existing mythology in another context. Yet the effort is there to exhibit a new form of the myth to the consumers who are the ones that are going to judge the final outcome. Their decision will be based on how well the first-order meaning was transported to the second. Then, after the new universe is established, it becomes the first-line of a new semiotic chain over which another creator can expand the mythology or modify over and over.

### *3.5. The Marvel Cinematic Universe: Translations for New Generations*

Throughout most of the 20th century and into the 21st, certain formats within the entertainment industry have witnessed a steep rise to prominence. Two of them in particular, cinema and television, have established their reach far beyond anything the written word could ever achieve. Because of this, many consumers have become dependent on obtaining their mythologies from audiovisual means rather than from literary sources. Regardless of whether one thinks this is good or bad as far as cultural habits go, the fact that the audiovisual arts have become widely accepted in our culture suggest that their style of narration should be regarded among the rest of the traditional storytelling outlets. Both the silver and the small screen involve their own languages. They each possess rules that establish how to expose and unfold meaning in a style that suits their elements. Yet not everything found in them is completely new. Many of the stories presented in movies and television take from literary sources such as classical plays, novels, or even the modern-day

superhero. The transference of these narratives from a textual-visual language to an audiovisual language implies a matter of translation. Literary and comic books have their own form of coding stories that require modification as they are given the movie or television treatment. In addition, the form of the narrative can also change due to displacement in format or culture as we have seen in past examples of translations.

When discussing the journey of a literary source into the audiovisual realm, the word that is often used is “adaptation.” Like a translation, an adaptation works as a second-order semiotic object since it requires a source or foundation from which it can channel meaning. Despite the similarities of the two concepts, their uses have not been wholly interchangeable. Linda Cahir, author of *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches*, explains that translation is traditionally employed when referring to the transference of a literary source from one language to another, while adaptation is used when a literary source is taken to a different media format or environment (14). The notion is due to a widely-held belief that literary translations tend to be more loyal to the source than audiovisual adaptations, whose final product are seen as more distanced. But as Cahir later points out, the processes of film adaptation and textual translation cross very similar paths. Therefore, in order to view a film based on a literary work as a translation, one must understand that:

1. *Every* act of translation is simultaneously an act of interpretation.
2. Through the process of translating, a new text emerges —*a unique entity*— not a mutation of the original matter, but a fully new work, which, in form and in function, is independent from its literary source.

3. Film translators of literature face the same challenges, dilemmas, interpretative choices, latitudes and responsibilities that any translator must face (14).

Cahir's ideas resonate with Will Eisner's comparison of a comic book illustrator as a translator that we saw in Chapter 1. As the translator works, they are faced with challenges that transform the target product into a new entity that is able to stand on its own. And indeed, film adapters, as translators, are the creators of a text or product that is self-contained and connected to the source simultaneously. In addition, the idea of *langue* and *parole* or second-order semiotic systems is also implied when Cahir states that it can be independent in form and function. The modifications are based on the translator's own experiences with the target language and their interpretation of the information that is received from the source. But translating text into a visual mean also requires other factors to be taken into measure. Film translators not only handle how the source content that will be transformed in the target product, but they also work with the *manner* in which the target product will be consumed. Therefore, Cahir's notion of film adapters as translators, while offering insight as to how the transference processes are similar, still leaves out how the final product will be consumed, which in this case, follows a different tradition from the source. We are here referring to the culture of cinema.

Concerning the culture of cinema, we must look into another author whose work on film translations bridges the process of transference with the finality of an adaptation. Patrick Cattrysse coincides with Cahir's notion that translation and adaptation intersect in their procedures. The distinguishing trait

thus, according to Cattrysse, are the contexts in which the processes of consumption are realized for each manifestation:

...linguistic or literary translation and film adaptation are distinguished under the perspective of the process of production, because the filmic process of creation occurs in social contexts different from those of reception process since the social context of reception of a literary text is different from that of a cinematographic one (qtd. in Viana da Silva 270).

In other words, what dominates the transfer process of a book to a movie are the rituals that surround the consumption of each format —the *how* will it be consumed. These dictate many of the alterations, from changes brought about cultural differences to modifications in storytelling due to the target format, that a textual source will sustain while being transposed into the language of cinema. It also takes into account the rituals (“parafilmic” activities, according to Cattrysse) that surround movies upon release: special screenings, previews, movie trailers, media presence, artist interviews, film distribution, and more. The combination of the two perspectives, the film-translation as a new, independent source and the consideration of the finality of the product, hold the key towards the analysis of a movie adaptation. Therefore, film translations should be read as what they are: the transfer of a meaning from a particular entertainment tradition made to be consumed in another tradition.

Marvel’s cinematic universe is the result of many years —and even, decades— of trial-and-error attempts that sought to perfect the consumption of a comic book superhero story in another media format. Some argue that the film trend that we are currently witnessing began with 2000’s first *X-Men* film, while others would go a bit further into the past and state that it was 1998’s

*Blade* that opened the floodgates to this new treatment of the cinema experience. Whichever the case, one cannot argue against the fact that the superhero craze that we have seen for the past decade —from 2008 forward— has been sustained, to some extent, due to the correspondence between the films themselves. Characters from specific movies or series were given screen time in other movies or series as a form of acknowledging the larger universe at hand. In this regard, Marvel’s incursion into cinema emulated their own comic-book-storytelling and publishing methods from the sixties. Their concept of a “shared universe” that resulted in the acknowledgement of another hero’s ventures, “cameo” appearances by main and secondary characters from other books, and frequent character team-ups was translated into the big screen successfully. It is here that Catrysse’s idea of the finality of an adaptation, the practices found in the consumption of a film, merges with a finality of the comic book tradition to result in a hybrid product. The Marvel films from 2008 onward were made to be consumed *as* comic books. While other literary adaptations are made to be transformed by the process of movie translation in order to be consumed as films that belong wholeheartedly to the audiovisual tradition, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU from hereon) is unique in the sense that it carried over a characteristic from its source tradition by merging it with the new environment.

We must clarify that by “unique” we do not mean that it has been the first or the only film series of movies to follow a shared world within a narrative. One of the earliest movie franchises in movie history, the Universal Monsters, possessed a similar structure: while the standalone movies seemed



serial due to their continuous storylines, they were also connected by a larger world which was evidenced through frequent character pairings in movies. This model of film narrative would fade from the limelight after suffering from overuse and would stay relatively dormant for a number of decades until Marvel Studios applied it to the movies made under their brand.

Unlike our analysis of the Marvel comics which had to be divided into phases for the sake of order, the films released by Marvel studios beginning in 2008 were actually doled out through phases. Each of the three (at the moment) phases handle their own contained story while also contributing to a larger storyline. The stories would then come full circle at the end of the phase in the form of a movie that ties all the loose ends presented in the individual films. The first phase of the Marvel movies, aptly titled “Avengers Assembled” (Jason Lee), establishes the foundation of the characters and the Avengers of this universe. Movies in this phase include *Iron Man* (2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), and finally, *The Avengers* (2012). Each served to introduce (or reintroduce, in the case of *The Incredible Hulk*) the cinematic versions of the Marvel characters and universe to movie audiences much like the comic book series from the sixties served to introduce the myths to the general public through comic books.

Like other versions of the Marvel universe (1602, Ultimates, Noir), the movie versions of these characters are but another translation of the source material. Their existence in an audiovisual medium is justified by the decisions the translators made in order to transfer them safely to the format.

And, like the other translations, this means that the cinematic universe is a *parole* of the main Marvel *langue* or, in other words, it is part of the larger Marvel multiverse. For some it may seem strange to regard an alternate version of a main superhero account from a completely different entertainment medium as a part of the larger continuity, but similar to when the comic book script is turned to illustrations and acquires a visual dimension, the comic book makes an intersemiotic leap (Jakobson) into a medium that makes use of sound and movement. New possibilities of language emerge in the transference process which are executed according to both the canon of the story and the traditions found in the target's format—in essence, not that different from the process of a literary translation process.

As a final consideration before our discussion of the MCU, we must first lay the ground theory that will be present in the analysis. Generally speaking, these movie translations also answer to a number of external or cultural stimuli that is reflected in the final product. The metaphorical-mythological nature of the source accounts allows for their essence to be carried over into the cinematic language even after superficial changes have been made. Thus, the films are the result of a transference process that seeks to make the Marvel superhero narrative coherent and viable in a new environment.

In regards to language, the process of adapting or translating a superhero myth into an audiovisual setting involves the regenerative factor we spoke about at the beginning of the chapter. Language functions as the means that transform the myths in order to make them understandable to the new

audience. Since movies also start out as scripts, the changes to the superhero stories begin as textual cues that become visual representations by the end of the film-making process. Changes are made by either subtracting or adding textual and visual language. Certain elements that may have stopped being relevant to today's audience will be subtracted as other, more historically-relevant language, will be added. By the time these translations were made, the source myths had become universal to mass culture and the acceptance of them relied heavily on two factors: how realistic the myth was portrayed without sacrificing its fantastic elements and how faithful is the translation to the source material.

Faithfulness when translating superhero narratives becomes a double-edged sword; in fact, it presents a problem to any cinematic project that tackles mythological narratives. On the one hand, today's consumers demand realistic stories and are not easily persuaded by un-factual situations, yet, on the other, the core or essence of the superhero and the mythological does require one to believe in the impossible. Here is where the consumer-driven mythology comes into play in the contemporary world: movie makers must adhere to a considerable amount of the source material in order to avoid backlash from the consumers, but not so much as to distance the narrative from contemporary realism. Although it seems like a straightforward task, the balance between the two is not written in stone and each superhero film proposes its own formula. When speaking generally about the matter of faithfulness, Cahir divides movie translations into three categories depending on how they approach the balance:

1. **literal translation:** which reproduces the plot and all its attending details as closely as possible to the letter of the book.
2. **traditional translation:** which maintains the overall traits of the book (its plot, settings, and stylistic conventions) but revamps particular details in those particular ways that the filmmakers see as necessary and fitting.
3. **radical translation:** which reshapes the book in extreme and revolutionary ways both as a means of interpreting the literature and of making the film a more fully independent work (16-17).

If one were to analyze the totality of Marvel adaptations since the very first that was released, one would notice a reverse-countdown pattern in the translations. But, since our analysis only encompasses the Marvel Studios' phases that began in 2008, we would state that the film translations have been almost all if not completely traditional.

### 3.6. *MCU Phase One (2008-2012)*

#### ***IRON MAN (2008)***

We begin our film analysis with 2008's *Iron Man* for a number of reasons. The first being that, chronologically-speaking, this movie is the first production that Marvel Studios handled by themselves and released with a particular world-building strategy in mind. The other reason—and the more pertinent one to our study—is that this film establishes the base language of the future MCU. Any of the settings or developed themes in subsequent entries can be traced back to this film. Therefore, *Iron Man* must be regarded as the foundation over which the rest of the films were made possible for more reasons than just being critically acclaimed.

The successful translation of the Marvel mythologies began through an intricate process of language renewal. This was initiated by revamping most of

the stories' settings and, consequently, bringing the characters into new socio-political implications. If one might recall from the first chapter, Iron Man's 1962 origin took place in South Vietnam, which had been a looming military conflict for the U.S. since the 1950s. This time around, in 2008, the setting of Iron Man's beginnings was made to reflect a military conflict from the current times: the "War on Terror" in the Middle East. The story opens with Anthony "Tony" Stark (played by actor Robert Downey Jr.) being transported inside a military convoy along with a group of soldiers in the Kunar Province of Afghanistan. As soon as the subtitles that establish the setting appear on screen, the viewer is made to bring forth all their knowledge about this particular conflict. Themes such as terrorism, radical Islamist groups, and even the U.S. military's overreach of power instantly replace previous-but-similar elements that were present in the source narrative. It is not "Vietnam" anymore, it is "Afghanistan." It is not the "war against Communism" this time, it is the "war against terror." The substitutions presented in the translation are justified by a myriad of secondary narratives found in the context of the consumer. These range from the War on Terror's unpopularity (reminiscent of Vietnam's very own unpopularity) to the seemingly improvisational foreign policy on behalf of the U.S. government in the region. The whole process of equivalence occurs in mere seconds as the consumers initiate their acceptance of this *parole* of the Iron Man myth.

In addition to changes in physical settings or environments, the first three minutes of the film serve to establish a temporal distance between the source material and the translation. Inside the military transport, Stark trades

banter with the soldiers and certain words come up that indicate different social or cultural practices that were not around in the 1960s. The first of these indications comes when Stark is asked about his sexual exploits with several Maxim magazine models. Even though it was founded in 1995, Maxim's status as a fashion and entertainment authority did not come to prominence until the mid-2000s. The second indication comes right after one of the soldiers asks Stark to take a picture with him and Stark jokingly responds "I don't want to see this on your Myspace page" (Favreau). The presence of "Myspace" both in the script and in the MCU as a whole acknowledges the existence of the social media phenomenon in the lives of the characters and supposes a great deal of changes that affect general human behavior, how people acquire their information, and how brands market themselves. The two indications are connected in the sense that, thanks to social media, many entertainment brands were able to expand their reach and create a larger following around their publishings. In other words, the Marvel characters were now susceptible to the same stimuli that had been influencing real-life consumers for almost a decade (and would continue to evolve in later years). The process of renewal in this case makes the whole narrative more relatable and, consequently, seem more realistic to the audience—which, as we mentioned before, is crucial for film translations.

Regarding the character itself, several characteristics from Stark's persona were emphasized to appeal to a modern audience. While it was established since the very first appearance of the character in *Tales of Suspense* #39 that he was both a scientist and a millionaire playboy—both

characteristics which were presented quickly in the translation—, the role of weapons manufacturer, which had not been portrayed with a negative light during the sixties, was now made to fit a growing disdain for war profiteers. In all fairness, the idea behind the Iron Man character has always had some relationship with hatred towards the military industrial complex of the U.S., but it was a disliking that was supposed to be turned on its head once readers became acquainted with the character. As Stan Lee explains in *With Great Power: The Stan Lee Story* documentary: “At that time, everybody was turned off with the military industrial complex. Just for fun, I thought I’d make Iron Man a symbol of the military industrial complex, and I’d make the readers like him! (Frakes, Lawrence Hess, and Dougas). Therefore, the War on Terror that the U.S. was currently waging made the perfect atmosphere for a revival of the character except for one aspect. In 2008, it was impossible, not to say potentially damaging, for a production of this sort to try and build a case in favor of the war. The easy access to information provided by the internet and the rapid sharing of information brought about by social media allowed people to keep a close eye on the government and its military. Thus, with an estimated military budget of 1 trillion dollars in 2008 alone (Cox 4) and the nation knee-deep in the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, consumers were not eager to root for anything that purported one of the causes of their economic woes.

This may be one of the reasons why the writers of *Iron Man* decided to make the story revolve around Stark coming to terms with the consequences of being a weapons manufacturer. In the beginning, we only sense allusions to

the subject in the form of a pesky reporter who throws a jab at Stark by inquiring about his “merchant of death” reputation, or in Stark’s enjoyment of selling weapons which emanated a scent of morbidity throughout. Yet, as the movie progresses and Stark is captured by the enemy (this time, a group of, presumably, Islamic extremists), he is made to see the fruit of his legacy: Much of the militant group’s cache was comprised solely of Stark Enterprise weapons. Not only that, but the group leader even hails Stark by calling him “the most famous mass murderer in the history of America” and requests Stark make a special weapon for him (Favreau). These events prompt Stark to rethink his line of work and renounce his weapons manufacture during an impromptu press conference where he references the military industrial complex in a negative tone: “I saw young Americans killed by the very weapons I created to defend them and protect the; and I saw that I had become part of a system that is comfortable with zero accountability” (Favreau). To no one’s surprise, the powers that be at Stark Industries oppose the sudden move and are later revealed to be dealing directly with terrorist groups. Stark then sees himself as a lone force fighting the system from within. The message conveyed here is clear: private interests maintain the status quo. In order to stand up against it in an effective manner, one must work from within and , hopefully, wield a lot of power.

This was the new world of the Marvel mythologies. It was one submerged in war (another one), economic recessions, and rapid technological advancements that bore constantly-shifting social practices as a result. Just like the comic books from the sixties, the movies would reference the cultural



changes as a sign of their new lease on life: as a form of stating “we are in the now and we acknowledge what is happening.” In addition, this also meant that they would grow alongside the developments of said technological and social progressions. The narrative formula that proved successful for the comics would also prove successful for the film translations and continue their lease on life for years to come.

### ***THE INCREDIBLE HULK (2008)***

If the Hulk character proved difficult to handle narrative-wise in the comics, then it would prove just as difficult (if not more) to fill ninety-plus minutes of the character on screen. Someway, somehow, the character’s lack of narrative possibilities became part of its radioactive DNA and survived into the cinematic translations. To date, the Hulk has seen two film adaptations and each have faced their own forms of failure. The first, simply titled *Hulk* and released in 2003, spent too much time trying to find a balance between human emotion and monstrous action that it ended up falling flat with audiences. For the second time around, 2008’s *The Incredible Hulk*, the now-Marvel Studios-helmed project avoided the burdensome (and time-consuming) task of explaining the character’s origin in order to dive directly into the story. The result, although somewhat more effective and entertaining than the first, was not enough to wow critics who were still mesmerized by *Iron Man*’s incredible balancing act of story elements. In the end, the film did its job in progressing the Phase One storyline and will be remembered for its then-innovative use of special effects, if at all.

In regards to substance, *The Incredible Hulk* built its narrative upon the language established in *Iron Man*, particularly over the theme of military industrial complex. Most of the movie centers around General Thaddeus “Thunderbolt” Ross’ (played by actor William Hurt) wish to harness the power of the Hulk and turn it into a deployable weapon. In order to achieve this, he uses every imaginable military resource available to him—which seem to be endless. But what is in question here is not just the copious amounts of money that are spent in questionable projects, but rather the lengths that the U.S. military is willing to go in order to keep with their interests. Ross is a man who does not think twice about manipulating those close to him including his daughter, whose stance on the Hulk issue he quickly disregards for his own gain. He is the living embodiment of the U.S. government and military during the War on Terror.

A number of parallels can be drawn between the movie and real-life scenarios from the external context. First, Bruce Banner, the Hulk, had successfully hid in a Brazilian favela for years with no incident of transformation. As soon as Ross is informed on Banner’s whereabouts, he quickly scrambles an operation. This operation implied the retrieval of a subject on foreign soil which, under any other circumstance, meant that their presence would be subject to scrutiny by international authorities. Nevertheless, we do not see or sense any attempt to follow with international law as the soldiers march into the favela and leave a wave of destruction in their path. The scenario mirrors the George W. Bush administration’s justification to send ground forces to Afghanistan in order to extract a terrorist

group leader. The idea that “the ends justify the means” had been sold to the U.S. citizens during the beginning of the war to no avail. As time rolled on, the “ends” did not produce any results and thus the means, which had failed to pass international scrutiny but proceeded anyways, were equally invalidated.

A second parallel can be made regarding the dubious nature of Ross’ projects. The general repeatedly green-lights any strategy regardless of the long-term risks they may pose to those he swore to protect. In a similar sense, the United States government proposed and approved various measures after September 11 under the pretense that they would serve in the best interest of the citizens and without thinking of any possible negative effects. Measures such as Operation TIPS (Terrorist Information and Prevention System) were proposed and intended to allow citizens to report anything they deemed suspicious to authorities for inspection. Critics from both sides of the political aisle were quickly to point out the resonance TIPS had with McCarthyism and the Communist witch hunt that had occurred in the 1950s. Because of additional privacy-threatening proposals, the adjective “Orwellian” became a constant when referring to the government’s decisions (Kellner). The word, which stems from English author George Orwell’s many writings on police or authoritarian states, describes a situation in which the liberties of the people are infringed by the state. Along these lines, however, the U.S. government did manage to pass the USA PATRIOT Act (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act) in October 26, 2001, which granted the government power to surveil the citizens should they deem it necessary. Critics of the Act highlight

the fact that such measure violates a citizen's right to privacy and argue that anyone from within the government could take advantage of it for personal intentions. To this day, the USA PATRIOT act still stands and is renewed on a four-to-five year basis.

### ***IRON MAN 2 (2010)***

It should not be a coincidence that the first sequel in the MCU came from the character that gave the first step towards the shared cinematic universe. *Iron Man 2* picks up shortly after the events of the first film and, in a span of six months, Tony Stark has reinvented Stark Industries and turned it into an organization that promotes peace through technological research and humanitarian deeds. There are just a couple of problems with the company in its present state: How can an entity promote peace if the bargaining chip—the Iron Man suit—is a weapon itself? Moreover, should the suit and Stark Industries be regulated by government agencies like other forms of military corporations both public or private? While these questions are near and dear to the Iron Man character itself, they can also be posed to the United States' efforts in the War on Terror. How can peace be achieved through perpetuating acts of war? If the U.S. nation wishes to persuade other countries into following international laws, are they not also bound by them?

In general terms, *Iron Man 2* makes viewers choose between one of two factions. On one side we have Tony Stark whom, after doing away with the ills of the military industrial complex in the first film, has fallen into another cycle of the status quo: promoting peace by means of deterrence. Practitioners of this philosophy believe that in order to effectively dissuade enemies from

committing acts of violence, one must have a more advanced and powerful weapon that would give one the “advantage” in a standoff or negotiation. In the real world, the belief found a counterpart in neoconservative and nuclear ideologue circles that peaked during the Bush-era administration. Government officials the likes of John Bolton, a lawyer and diplomat who served in number of positions during the Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush administrations, believed that not only should the U.S. police other countries as to their nuclear arsenals, but also be the only nation allowed to possess any nuclear weapons at all. During a July 29, 2009 interview in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Bolton ended his segment with the following comments: “There is not that much difference between me and the people who want a world where no government has nuclear weapons. I only want one government to have nuclear weapons” (Cirincione). Although Stark did not want the U.S. government to also have the weapon *per se*, he does channel Bolton’s sentiment when keeping the Iron Man suit as a way to give himself and his company leverage over other government and private entities. In the end, he had become what he fought in the first film, a defender of private interests in the military.

The other side of the argument, that of the U.S. government or “status quo,” is represented this time by Senator Stern (played by veteran comedian Garry Shandling), who urges Stark to sell his Iron Man blueprint so that other companies could innovate and sell their own models. Alongside Stern is Justin Hammer (played by Sam Rockwell), another weapons manufacturer who lobbies government officials to force Stark into selling his invention. In what

seems a conflictive and repetitive move, this faction of the argument not only represents government interests, but also private interests when Hammer is added to the equation. The distinguishing factor between the two sides is then the *intent* behind each party. We know and believe that Stark wishes to use the Iron Man suit for good while we distrust the motivations of Stern and Hammer. The story then relies on the consumer's favoritism for the Stark character in order to pull off their main conflict, but it does not stand as a reasonable nor convincing narrative because, in the end, it is just private interests against private interests. Iron Man has become part of the new status quo.

### ***THOR* (2011)**

*Thor* is perhaps the toughest title to tackle because, as a character in the movie says, "I'm talking about science, not magic!" (Branagh). Indeed, *Thor* is the first film in the MCU to leave our plane of existence and base its narrative on the realm of Asgard from Nordic mythology. Regardless of its fantastic elements, the situations and the dialogue that surround the plot of the story can be seen as allegorical situations to the events that led to the War on Terror. The result is an interesting feat since it uses the metaphorical language of classical mythologies to represent modern-day scenarios instead of the usual contemporary language that reflect events from its immediate context.

The movie opens with a passing of the torch from father to son. Odin (played by Anthony Hopkins) is about to hand over the crown to his son, Thor (played by Chris Hemsworth). Suddenly, a group of Frost Giants enter Asgard to steal an object. They kill a number of Asgardians in the process and break a

centuries-long truce between the two factions. Angry and desirous for revenge, Thor defies his father's orders and leads an expedition to Jotunheim, home of the Frost Giants. After a brutal battle, Odin arrives to make amends, but it is too late. Angry at his son for initiating a war out of revenge, Odin strips Thor of his right to the crown and sends him to Earth without his powers.

While the basis for the plot may have been taken straight from Nordic tradition, the language in the dialogues evoked contemporary situations. For example, after the incident, Thor demands a counterattack be put into action because he considered the infiltration of the Frost Giants to be "... an act of war!" (Branagh). Yet Odin stresses the existence of a truce and points out that "This was the act of but a few" (Branagh) as a way of contemplating the events before reacting brusquely. The sense behind Odin's words reverberate how some came to view the September 11 attacks that led to the War on Terror. Al Qaeda was but a sect within Afghanistan, but an U.S. invasion of the whole region would somehow make the whole region responsible for the acts of a comparative few. The parallel between movie and real life becomes even more evident when, after attacking Jotunheim, Thor ignites a conflict that many in Asgard—including Odin—regarded as unwanted or unneeded. The invasion of Afghanistan, as we have mentioned, was immensely panned both before and after it initiated. Protests against the military intervention in the Middle East occurred as soon as September 29, 2001 ("Anti-war rallies in Washington, New York") and continued for over a decade (Keyes). With the passing of time, the sensation of an unwanted conflict transferred to all matter of government officials and civilians. In 2009, a British foreign secretary

would categorize the whole affair as “a mistake” (Borger) while six years later, in 2015, a candidate for the presidency of the United States would upgrade the status to a “terrible mistake” (Diamond). Furthermore, another comparison that can be alluded to in this situation is the fact that the Odin and Thor relationship can be understood as a stand-in to the George H. Bush and George W. Bush presidencies. Particularly in how the latter went ahead and escalated a conflict his father could not manage to undertake during his administration for a number of reasons.

As a curious observation, *Thor* also includes language that would become central in the U.S. political sphere during the 2016 elections. As the War on Terror continued its course into the 2010s, the world witnessed the rise of a new, more violent terrorist group named ISIL (short for Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). The group quickly distinguished itself from others and, just as quickly, earned the top spot in the world’s “most wanted” list. Attacks by ISIS or its affiliated groups became a global epidemic that cost many lives in places such as Paris, France; San Bernardino, California; and Baghdad, Iraq, to name a few. As a consequence, radical conservative movements emerged from all corners of the western world to denounce what they considered to be inaction from the world’s foremost authorities. They demanded the implementation of extreme countermeasures against ISIS or anyone with the same nationality and religion as them. In the United States, the conservative party —the Republican party— accused then-President Barack Obama of being too soft with the handling of the new enemy (Healy). They believed that a lack of forceful counteraction translated into weakness



and that the idea of a weak nation would open the door to more attacks. Furthermore, they also wished to do away with diplomatic solutions arguing that those sort of strategies had failed to contain the threat (Ashdown; Engel, respectively). This whole scenario, the rejection of diplomacy and the favoring of a violent approach, is eerily foreseen in the movie during a scene where Odin scorns Thor for attacking Jotunheim:

Thor: Why did you bring us back? [to Asgard]

Odin: Do you realize what you've done? What you've started?

Thor: I was protecting my home.

Odin: You cannot even protect your friends. How do you hope to protect your kingdom? [...]

Thor: There won't be a kingdom to protect if you're afraid to act. The Jotuns must learn to fear me just as they once feared you.

Odin: That's pride and vanity talking, not leadership. You have forgotten everything I've taught you ...

Thor: While you wait and be patient **the Nine Realms laugh at us** (emphasis added). The old ways are done —you'd stand giving speeches while Asgard falls (Branagh).

We have emphasized the line "... the Nine Realms laugh at us" because it is an exact duplicate of a line that the Republican candidate for the 2016 election, Donald Trump, commonly used during his campaign. Trump capitalized on the U.S. citizen's fear of ISIS and the uncertainty of the American economy to attack his predecessor, Barack Obama, a Democrat, whom Trump deemed weak on both defense and economy. He repeated "The U.S. is the laughingstock of the world" on numerous rallies in order to stir up his followers into action (Finnegan). The strategy was enough to earn Trump the 2016 election, but actual action or change is yet to be seen.

***CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE FIRST AVENGER (2011)***

Before the debut of the first proper MCU film in 2008, the higher ups at Marvel Studios held many meetings on how to approach the translation of Captain America to the big screen. These talks were not simply about how to make the character look in a real-world setting, but they also handled the problem of how to garner interest for a symbol of the American nation during a time when the United States' global reputation had been suffering. By this moment in time, the U.S. had slowly begun to face the backlash of its highly unpopular war. The result was an anti-American atmosphere purported by governments and other important figures from across the planet. In 2007, before *Iron Man* was released, the entertainment website IGN inquired Marvel Studios President of Production Kevin Feige about the anti-American sentiments and the Captain America character. Although Feige recognized the challenge, he seemed to lessen its possible consequences by highlighting Marvel's recent success with audiences across the globe:

I certainly think we'll have to play with that. Play with Captain America being this patriotic propaganda machine on one hand, but being a very human Steve Rogers, interesting, fascinating hero in his own right ... The good news is Marvel is perceived pretty well around the world right now, and I think putting another uber-Marvel hero into the worldwide box office would be a good thing. The script David Self is writing [and] the director that we end up hiring... we certainly are going into it with our eyes open that these are all things that we have to deal with much the same way that Captain America, when thawed from the Arctic ice entered a world that he didn't recognize, and had to sort of deal with the changes, whether it was when Stan [Lee] did it in the '60s and that world Steve Rogers was coming into, or the world of 2009 (IGN Staff).

Unbeknownst to Feige at the time, the last sentence in his statement would prove exactly right. The political context of the late 2000's did not feel that

much different from the political environment of 1964. Back then, the Captain had awakened to a U.S. nation that was in the process of escalating the Vietnam conflict and had also earned some negative response because of it. The slight difference was that, this time around, he would awaken to a world that had already turned its back on the United States because of yet another unfavorable conflict. It seems like this symbol of the American spirit enjoys to thrive during moments of severe political divide.

*Captain America: The First Avenger* is an interesting example of various types of movie translations coexisting in one film. About three quarters of the movie address the Captain's origin in its original World War II setting, while the opening and closing sequences round up another part of the myth which is the reawakening of the character to a modern era (added to the Captain America mythos in 1964 when he was brought back to join the Avengers). Throughout all the matter, we witness two forms of Linda Cahir's movie translations in just one film: the literary translation of Captain America's WWII origin and a traditional translation of his reawakening.

If there ever was an executive decision behind having two different forms of translations, then it has not been made known or it is not easy to uncover. But we can speculate on the notions that normalized or allowed for the existence of these two forms of translation under one narrative. We infer that, since WWII-era United States has such a good standing both in the minds of its citizens and in the international consensus, it was easier to leave this part of the myth unaltered due to its assured acceptance. Marvel movie translators just needed to appropriate the language found in Captain America's first

publishings and translate them verbatim to film—which they did. Nazis, war bonds, and a young man’s desire to serve his country brought back countless narratives that were habitual in 1940s America. But for the second part of the myth, the return of Captain America, the date was changed from 1964 to sometime in the late 2000’s or early 2010’s in order to correspond with the film’s release. The implications of this language renewal, though not explored in the film even slightly, suggests that the Captain woke up to bear the burden of a different unfavorable war. Consumers could then speculate on whether the Captain would come to favor the conflict or voice his opinion against it depending on their experience with the character’s stories of the sixties. Whichever the answer would come to be for this translation of the character, the only certainty was that the Captain America myth had been successfully renewed for a new generation with the help from factors far beyond the movie makers’ own reach.

### ***THE AVENGERS (2012)***

Predicted by many to be the “blockbuster of the year” before it even opened, 2012’s *The Avengers* was the most ambitious superhero translation to date. For Marvel Studios, the film symbolized an achievement with the coming together of five years of MCU continuity. But for Marvel and its more veteran followers, it meant the realization of five decades of comic book stories. The success of the film, much like Marvel’s success when it printed its first book, was due to the story’s focus on the characters’ inner turmoils rather than their virtues. In the film review website Rotten Tomatoes, *The Avengers*

holds a 92% rating with a consensus that states the following: “Thanks to a script that emphasizes its heroes’ humanity and a wealth of superpowered set pieces, *The Avengers* lives up to its hype and raises the bar for Marvel at the movies.” Accordingly, the translation of *The Avengers* proved that both Marvel’s superhero innovation from the sixties as well as the “mythological treatment” service that was later rendered to other licenses could be transferable to audiovisual forms of entertainment. After 51 years of producing modern mythologies, Marvel still had new storytelling ground to cover.

In terms of narrative, *The Avengers* is an amalgam of all its predecessors. It includes the status quo debate from both *Iron Man* films, the government and military overreach concern from *The Incredible Hulk*, the national security allegories from *Thor*, and continues to further Captain America’s translation to the modern age.

The movie opens with Thor’s brother, Loki (played by actor Tom Hiddleston), infiltrating the government agency S.H.I.E.L.D. (short for Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division) and stealing a powerful source of energy dubbed the Tesseract. Loki’s reason, aside from including the stereotypical “world domination,” invokes a concept that had been featured in the U.S.’s national conversation for the past decade: freedom. Loki states that he wishes to liberate the humans from freedom because it is the latter’s belief of this concept what creates conflicts rather than unity (Whedon). Unsurprisingly, the reasoning behind the logic was not far off in a historical sense. In the real world, an idea of freedom had been used to sell the War on Terror from 2001 to 2003 by the George W. Bush

administration. According to Stephen D. Reese and Seth C. Lewis' essay "Framing the War on Terror: The internalization of policy in the US press," the Bush administration's definition of the "enemy" after the 9/11 attacks was based on a simple "us versus them" logic that highlighted the different culture's (perceived) notions of "freedom":

*The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (White House, 2003) defined the attacks of 9/11 as 'acts of war against the United States of America and its allies, and against the very idea of civilized society'. It identified the enemy as terrorism, an 'evil' threatening our '**freedoms** (emphasis added) and our way of life' (p. 1) (779).

The official assessment of the 9/11 attacks basically states that the enemy, which came from a completely different culture, committed the acts because their way of life was not compatible with the American way of life. This oversimplistic conclusion generalized religious and cultural differences as threats to the American being's personal lifestyle. In basic terms, it made American citizens choose between their survival or the Other's and, as the many other words and ideas presented by the ruling part of a society, its connotation trickled down to all other sectors of U.S. culture thanks to news and media outlets that made it a common staple of the national discussion (781). As more and more people began encountering this "logic," many fell victim to its simple nature and war became more probable. It seemed that Loki had been right in his assertion of freedom and how it caused more differences among humans rather than unite them.

After Loki's intrusion, head of S.H.I.E.L.D. operations Nick Fury (played by Samuel L. Jackson) begins his Avengers initiative program which involves recruiting the known heroes from the MCU. The first character that

Fury approaches (in the movie) is Captain America or Steve Rogers. During their conversation, Fury inquires about Rogers' lack of interest in the modern world and Rogers explains that, even though the Allies (and the U.S.) had won World War II, it seemed as if more had been lost than actually earned (Whedon). There are a number of ways to interpret these comments and they mostly deal with the same purpose Captain America's return to the comics seemed to have. The Captain America symbol is one of patriotic loyalty and pride, but it maneuvers under the immutable concept of justice found in the essence of the American subject. His comments seem to be directed at what the United States had become after WWII and how it dealt with subsequent armed conflicts (Vietnam, South America, Middle East, among others). This notion is confirmed by Fury's response, which also earns more than one interpretation. Fury says that "We've made some mistakes along the way. Some very recently" (Whedon). If we were to understand these lines within the context of the film, then the mistakes Fury refers to are the wars and interventions after the 1940s, while the "recent" event refers to the U.S.'s involvement with superheroes and cosmic power cubes. But if we were to take them by the happenings in the exterior, in the worldly context in which the movie was made, then the "recent" event to which Fury makes reference is none other than the War on Terror since the others clearly point to unfavorable conflicts.

While on the subject of Captain America, one can also find nudges to themes and scenarios from *The Avengers* comic in the movie. During one moment, S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Phil Coulson (played by Clark Gregg) expresses

his admiration for Captain America. Then, after Rogers comments about his original costume being a bit “old fashioned” for the modern world, Coulson replies: “[With] Everything that’s happening, the things that are about to come to light, people just might need a little ‘old fashioned’” (Whedon). This scene is a direct adaptation from a scene in *The Avengers* #4 when, after walking outside for the first time, Captain America is approached by a street cop who expresses his admiration for the Sentinel of Liberty and tells him that he is needed now more than ever. In both occasions, the representative of modernity communicates a nostalgia for simpler times because the present is either too complicated or ridden with mistakes. Furthermore, when Captain America is finally deployed to stop Loki from carrying out an attack in Berlin, Germany, Loki refers to the Captain as “the man out of time” (Whedon). The words take us back to the various instances where Captain America either struggled or was presented with his displacement (“anachronism”) of time. Although the movie brushes off the matter and does not emphasize on the psychological implications that time displacement might cause, the germ of the idea can be perceived.

Finally, in regards to Iron Man and the Hulk, both the military-industrial-complex-status-quo and government overreach of power themes are present in the movie. Immediately after joining the initiative, Tony Stark begins noticing discrepancies between Fury’s words and S.H.I.E.L.D.’s actions. Bruce Banner (now played by Mark Ruffalo) also sees the inconsistencies and joins Stark in doubting Fury and S.H.I.E.L.D.’s real intentions. It is no coincidence that these two characters should join forces to



uncover a hidden agenda, since both *Iron Man* films deal with government secrecy and *The Incredible Hulk* explores the secrets that the military keeps in order to “protect” its people. On the other hand, Captain America’s “pure soldier” nature blinded him from seeing any wrongdoing at first, but after being confronted by Banner and Stark, Rogers does some investigating of his own and stumbles into the whole scheme: S.H.I.E.L.D. was planning to use the unlimited power of the Tesseract to fabricate weapons of their own. Upon the discovery, Rogers channels his immutable concept of justice to face Fury and tells him “I was wrong, director. The world hasn’t changed a bit” (Whedon). Proving that the battle against shadow governments and private interests was nothing new of the sort (and would continue to exist well into the second phase).

### 3.7. *MCU Phase Two (2013-2015)*

Having established the basis of the universe, Marvel Studios continued to expand its cinematic narratives into the second phase. With the exception of two new adaptations, the rest of the releases are sequels to titles that were introduced in the first phase. Because of it, we see a departure from the language of renewal and see more of a world-building dynamic in which current or external world events shaped notions and plots within the MCU through the addition of new language. Translation of the source material is still present as the movies introduce characters and villain-dynamics that played key roles in the comic books, but the main attention can be seen veering off

into pure fiction in terms of plot and its elements. Because of this, we consider the sequel films in this Phase to be more like adaptations rather than translations, since the character had already been transferred from one medium to another (translation) and is now in the process of evolving in its new environment.

### ***IRON MAN 3 (2013)***

The MCU's firstborn and the only character to already have a sequel is—unsurprisingly—the very same character that ushers in the second phase. *Iron Man 3* deviates from the first two films' primary concern of translating the Iron Man myth for contemporary audiences and shifts its main attention to character dynamics, which also takes cue from the source material. Tony Stark's arrogance, a common staple of the character in the comic books, finally takes center stage and is accompanied by another trait known to readers: psychological and emotional distress. Stark suffers from anxiety attacks due to the events that occurred in *The Avengers* and avoids any help by driving attention away from his problems (though not from himself). But, in a moment of overconfidence, he makes the whereabouts of his mansion known to the public and is attacked. After almost everyone thinks him dead, Stark is left to find his way back without the thing that shields him most from his issues: his suit.

For this film, writers decided to bring one of Iron Man's greatest foes, the Mandarin, to the cinematic universe. Yet, the Mandarin character is something that is lost in translation since he was based on China's imperialist history, communism, and Cold War prejudices. Regardless of those particular

social and political implications, the *Iron Man 3* translators decided to revise Mandarin's origins and made them "fit" into the contemporary Middle East conflict. The modernization of the Mandarin resulted in the character being relegated to a "title" or "persona" which two characters assumed at some point in the movie. The first person thought to be Mandarin was a Middle Eastern-looking British actor named Trevor Slattery (played by actor Ben Kingsley). Slattery was hired to play Mandarin in televised appearances by the real mastermind, Aldrich Killian (played by actor Guy Pearce), who was a scientist and weapons manufacturer whom felt he had been wronged by Tony Stark in the past. Thus, even though Mandarin's translation to the big screen failed to honor the source material, particularly in how they changed his nationality without altering the name (though no particular comments about a Middle Eastern terrorist named "Mandarin" were ever made), there were other elements surrounding this version of the nemesis that validated his presence to movie audiences.

Mandarin's existence in the MCU is validated by the character's *modus operandi*. The character's actions mirrored what modern terrorist groups were carrying out during the War on Terror. One of these was the release of tapes or videos in which the Mandarin issued threats or spoke about his organization's ideals or philosophy. In the real world, videos of threats, executions, or of assuming responsibility for attacks had been a common part of terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and were distributed digitally so that anyone with an internet connection could easily happen upon them. Moreover, Mandarin assumed responsibility for a number of attacks that included human

detonations, otherwise known as suicide bombers. Again, the presence of suicide bombers echoed a larger event that was unfolding in the external world. Suicide bombers had become a distinguishing characteristic of terrorist attacks during the War on Terror as their occurrence rose exponentially from past decades (Horowitz 73). It is due to these and other reasons that this version of Iron Man's nemesis is validated in the minds of moviegoers. The language that surrounds his actions is so relevant that consumers cannot doubt or deny them from happening. Familiarity or the viewer's experience with Middle Eastern terrorism plays a big role in the acceptance of the message. Although Mandarin's semiotic object may have been blurred, a new object from the current military conflict was created and put in its place so that the consumers reconcile the character and the changes made to the translation.

Finally, the most direct example of *Iron Man 3* using modern language is found when, in classic comic book fashion, Aldrich Killian reveals his master plan. Killian, through his scientific agency Advanced Idea Mechanics (A.I.M., for short), had developed a weapon which allowed humans to harness energy, but also worked with government to deter terrorism. His goal was to obtain the trust of the U.S. government by using the fear that resulted from his human bomb experiments and the Mandarin videos. After Stark discovers the plan and is apprehended by Killian, the latter explains his motives in black and white: "This time tomorrow, I'll have the West's most powerful leader in one hand, and the world's most feared terrorist in the other. I'll own the War on Terror" (Shane Black). The constant variable in this narrative is the same that we saw in the first two films: corporate interests taking over—or wanting to

take over— military interests. But this time, the external context is directly referenced when Killian cites “the War on Terror” in his explanation. Among the many criticisms of the Middle East conflict, none had the same implications as the fact that many individuals in the U.S., politicians and corporate types alike, benefited greatly from the war. American companies such as Halliburton, along with the help of lobbyists in Washington D.C., influenced government officials to perpetuate the state of conflict and vice versa (Turley and Aikins, respectively). This created a whole new status quo which produced more defense contractors, more lobbyists, and required more government spending for the war. In the movie, the cycle presumably ends as soon as Killian is obliterated by Iron Man. But in the real world, there is no such thing as an Iron Man to end war profiteering.

***THOR: THE DARK WORLD (2013)***

In essence, *Thor: The Dark World* is every bit the same as its predecessor, *Thor*. Asgard is (once again) attacked by an enemy which results in great amounts of losses. Thor then resorts to seek revenge through direct confrontation while his father, Odin, prefers a more strategic solution. Thor does not follow his father’s wishes and ends up establishing a counterstrike of his own. Only this time, the repercussions of Thor’s rogue plan are good and not catastrophic as they were in the first movie.

Although this sequel is riddled with even more fantastic elements than the first —thus furthering it from making it concrete references to reality—, there are still a few scenarios that reverberate the political context of 2013’s United States. For example, the movie begins with Thor and company

securing the Nine Realms which had been in turmoil ever since the events of the first movie. The decision can be seen as a diplomatic move on behalf of Asgard since, as they sent their troops to liberate the Nine Realms, they also asserted their military power and political presence along the way. This is confirmed when Thor returns from securing Vanaheim and Odin tells him, “For the first time since Bifrost was destroyed, the Nine Realms are at peace. They’re well reminded of our strength...” (Taylor). The whole event can be seen as a metaphor for U.S. foreign relations during the Barack Obama presidency. The Obama administration sought to restore political ties with countries that had been shunned by the George W. Bush administration while maintaining their status as a potency. Furthermore, the Obama administration also carried the responsibility of restoring the U.S.’s credibility which had severely suffered to to the War on Terror and the Bush administration’s handling of foreign relations. The relationship between Thor and Odin in this movie stands more as a “changing of the guard” where a new, different management is seen as taking over for the old way of handling things.

Other parallels that are found in the movie include Loki and his assumption (or lack thereof) of responsibility for the consequences of his actions. Loki is made to carry the burden for the events of both *Thor* and *The Avengers*, while not assuming responsibility for any of them due to his different take on both matters. When pressed for answers in a trial by Odin, Loki veers off subject as if he were lessening the importance of the accusations and Odin replies: “Do you not truly feel the gravity of your crimes?” (Taylor). Likewise, by 2013, many critics of the War on Terror wished for the “architects of the war” to be jailed or processed legally (Helm).

The names of two figures in particular, then U.K. prime minister Tony Blair and then U.S. President George W. Bush, were constantly suggested to stand trial for war crimes. While the U.K. intended to begin its own sentencing of Blair which has been ever since delayed due to technicalities (Dodd), the U.S. never even considered the possibility of accusing Bush of anything. Even so, at the end of his presidency, Bush can be seen as doubling down on his reasons for the war. In a 2008 U.S. News article that discusses the legacy of the Bush presidency, author Kenneth T. Walsh cites a description of the President in which it is stated that “He seemed to harbor few, if any, regrets” about his decisions at the time. Walsh then adds his own commentary about the President’s opinion as an update to the quoted text and states that “He still feels that way” (Online), stressing the fact that the former President could never fully understand or see the consequences of his actions like Loki.

Lastly, a minor similarity can also be found in a special ability of the movie’s antagonists. The villains sport the ability to cloak their ships and avoid being detected before an attack. Even Heimdall, the all-seeing and all-hearing guardian of Asgard cannot sense them in any form: “We face an enemy that is invisible even to me. What use is a guardian such as that?” (Taylor). This “invisible” nature of the assailants bears resemblance to the invisible nature of the radical ideology that was found at the root of unexpected suicide bombers or terrorist attacks during the time. Since the real danger of radical Islamism is the ideology behind it, many high-ranking U.S. military officers concluded that this attribute made the war an unconventional conflict a number of years after it began. There was no “secret base” or holdout that one could destroy in order to claim victory. The threat spread

through ideas, through propaganda (online or word-of-mouth), and the radicalization process made its way in silence; invisibly. Just as Heimdall felt powerless to stop them, the Western world felt powerless and reconfigured its methods to thwart attacks. While some advocated for a better push against radicalized propaganda, others preferred just doing away with everyone who can be subjected to radicalization —Muslims in general. To this day, there is no consensus on either solution as well as there has been no considerable progress meant to thwart the attacks.

### ***CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER (2014)***

Continuing where both *First Avenger* and *The Avengers* left off, Steve Rogers continues trying to find his place in a modern world riddled with complexities. At times, *The Winter Soldier* emphasizes on the “man out of time” and the “eternal soldier” aspects of Captain America that were presented in the comics and briefly alluded to in *The Avengers* movie. Scenes such as when the Black Widow (played by Scarlett Johansson) playfully refers to Rogers as a “fossil” serve to remind viewers of his temporal displacement. In addition, Rogers considers a life out of active duty after being discouraged by the double nature of modern warfare. This venture is quickly halted as soon as Sam Wilson (played by Anthony Mackie) asks him “What makes you happy?” (Russo brothers). The abrupt ending of the scene after the question implies that what makes Captain America happy is serving the people and no other thing can take the place of military duty. The abstract ideal of a World War II America is present in both situations as decades have passed since the war and as it involves a time when serving the nation meant something completely different.



Even though a considerable part of the film is devoted to S.H.I.E.L.D.'s dubious dealings and Captain America's disapproval of Nick Fury's secrecy, we believe that the focal points of this movie are the violation of citizen's privacy and the consequential creation of a police state under the pretense of national security. One of the various secrets that Fury kept from Captain was the development of an aircraft fleet (helicarriers) meant to "protect" the citizens of the United States from terrorism (or attacks in general). These operated on a computer algorithm that evaluated crime probabilities within each individual by monitoring their every move. Thus, a terrorist or criminal could be stopped before they even committed the crime. Fury justifies the methods by stating that "We're going to neutralize a lot of threats before they happen" and "For once, we're way ahead of the curve" as a response to the real-life failure of predicting and effectively thwarting terrorism (Russo brothers). This might present a plausible strategy to those who seek a quick and simple answer to the problem. Yet, for those who lean more towards a humane and democratic solution (such as Captain America), this strategy infringes on a number of constitutional and private citizen rights. Rogers is quick to remind Fury that "I thought the punishment usually came after the crime" referring to the right to a fair trial and the legal recourse of *habeas corpus*. Moreover, Rogers alludes to the inevitability of a police state by saying that "This isn't freedom, this is fear" (Russo brothers). The idea that the state or an entity had the right to supervise the actions of any citizen and act upon suspicion was not —for Rogers— a sign of a sane government practices.

One need not go very far to find the real-world counterparts for these ideas. As we mentioned before during our analysis of *The Incredible Hulk*, a number of questionable measures had been either considered or approved by U.S. lawmakers after September 11 under the pretense of national security. One not-so-known measure at the time was the creation of a surveillance network that spread throughout the globe and looked into phone records, internet databases, or private purchase histories of every single citizen. The network came to public attention in 2013 thanks to a whistleblower, Edward Snowden, who at the time worked for one of the largest defense contractors in the United States. Snowden leaked thousands of classified documents that described how the National Security Agency (NSA, for short) was able to request cell phone “metadata” directly from the cell phone companies and how another data-mining program, PRISM, was able to extract more personal details from the data (Ian Black). At the root of all the spying was the very same Bush-era PATRIOT ACT that we spoke about earlier on and its subsequent renewal under President Obama. The existence of the Act allowed for the creation of a government spying ring under the pretense of national security. At the time of the scandal, President Obama was quoted as saying the everyone was "going to have to make some choices between balancing privacy and security to protect against terror” (qtd. in Ian Black). Like Fury, the general idea is that the ends justify the means, and that some individual liberties must be given up for the benefit of everyone.

***GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY (2014)***

By this time in the timetable, MCU movies began pulling further and further away from matters pertaining to the earth. Marvel's cosmic universe — which was not discussed in the dissertation because it took form after the sixties— was introduced in order to expand the number of characters and narratives on the silver screen. This meant that the language of said movies would be even more distanced from their context as they focused largely on science fiction and space opera traditions. But it is very rare, not to say impossible, to find a work completely devoid of politicized language and such is the case with *Guardians of the Galaxy*. No matter how implausible or fictional the whole of the film may be, there is always at least one character being surrounded by familiar language.

In the case of *Guardians of the Galaxy*, we witness external language in the motivations and dialogue behind its main antagonist, Ronan. Ronan belongs to a space race known as the Kree who have been at war with another race, the Xandarians, for over a thousand years. In the movie, the Kree and the Xandarians sign a ceasefire to halt their centuries-long battle, but many individuals such as Ronan do not honor the ceasefire nor consider it a binding agreement due to their political stances.

In the language of Ronan, there are several real-life elements at play. First, the topic of a ceasefire reminds us of a pair of highly publicized military conflicts. The first of these conflicts is the Syrian Civil War that began in 2011 and, as of 2018, has not seen its end. This conflict is waged between the tyrannous government of Bashar al-Assad (whose family has been in power

for over thirty years) and several opposition forces who believe a change is long overdue. Conflict zones include cities, homes, public spaces, and the results of these are known for creating the first dire immigration crisis of the twenty-first century. In May 2014, a ceasefire was accorded for the city of Holms in order to allow civilians to leave the zone and allow the rebellious forces to regroup (Chulov). But this was not the first nor would it be the last ceasefire in the trajectory of the conflict, as many others had been made, but were eventually broken by any of the factions for reasons that pertain to sectarian priorities (Chulov). The Syrian conflict, in its sectarian aspect, is reflected in the war between the Kree and the Xandarians, with Ronan being an agent of perpetual chaos that exists in both factions.

The other conflict that also comes to mind when speaking of ceasefires is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has been waging for a little over half a century. The long duration of this conflict resembles the “thousand years” of the Kree-Xandarian conflict in a hyperbolic fashion. Moreover, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict’s extensive history of ceasefires and their lack of honoring by both sides is also present in Ronan’s view of the Kree-Xandarian ceasefire.

The second real-life element that Ronan evokes in his language is the presence of a radicalism or an extremist ideology in a group or nationality. In 2014, the War on Terror and radical Islamist groups such as ISIS continued their wake of terror with attacks and constant media presence. In some parts of the world, the conversation moved to the stopping of radicalism and what moderate followers of Islam could do to prevent extremism in their

neighborhoods. An effort was made to separate “real” Islam from the version of the faith that the terrorist groups claimed to practice. During an address to the nation in September 2014, President Obama presented his notion that “ISIL is not Islamic” and continued to explain their differences in philosophy and practices. In *Guardians of the Galaxy*, Ronan is presented as an extremist agent who follows a different interpretation of his people’s will. Evidence can be found in Ronin’s very first lines in the movie, in which he appears to distance himself from both his enemy and people of his race simultaneously:

They call me terrorist, radical, zealot... because I obey the ancient laws of my people, the Kree. and punish those who do not. Because I do not forgive your people for taking the life of my father, and his father, and his father before him. A thousand years of war between us will not be forgotten! (Gunn).

The words the introduction must be looked at carefully in order to obtain a better understanding. The first adjective “terrorist” is implied to come from the Xandarians who would perceive any active fighter from the Kree’s side as a terrorist. The second, “radical,” can come from people within his own race who perceive his beliefs and methods as undiplomatic or too extreme to condone. Lastly, the word “zealot” implies a fanatical devotion of an ideology or religion. In this case, the object of said devotion would be the Kree race and cause, but the presence of an extreme view can only mean that there are also moderate ideologies in existence, since one side cannot exist without the other to which it is being compared to. Thus, it could be said that Ronan was not a total representation of the Kree’s methods or beliefs, but that he was a distorted version of their ideals —just like it was said of Muslim extremists.

***AVENGERS: AGE OF ULTRON (2015)***

The sequel to *The Avengers* rounded out the second phase's common theme of government secrecy and national security. This time around, it would be Iron Man who, after receiving a vision in which all the Avengers were killed and the earth was destroyed, decides to make an artificial intelligence capable of surveilling the planet and protecting it from foreign attacks. The plan backfires and the artificial intelligence, named Ultron, becomes sentient, allowing it to alter its mission from one of protection to one of annihilation. The team, along with a pair of newcomers, must find a way to stop the new threat while rediscovering their own purpose in the MCU.

*Avengers: Age of Ultron's* main attraction involves the translation of one of the Avenger's most known enemies: Ultron. The character, which debuted in *The Avengers* #54 (July 1968), was originally created by the team's scientist, Hank Pym (the original Ant-Man and later Giant Man). While his original appearance in the sixties does nothing more than establish him as a villain, he later acquired more defining traits as decades of narratives carried him along. At this moment, Ultron is a cross between Pinnochio and Frankenstein: a mechanical doll that wishes to be "alive" and that haunts its creator. Due to the influence of the latter, he is also a metaphor for technological advances gone awry. Yet there are several things that make Ultron stand out from others, mainly his obsession with Hank Pym. Ultron's development has seen him evolve from simply wanting to kill Pym, to wanting to marry Pym's wife, and more recently, wanting to be Pym. All in all, Ultron

makes for an interesting character in times of technological advancements and in the subject of childhood trauma.

Due to the fact that Hank Pym had not appeared in the MCU at the moment of the film's release, translators had to modify certain aspects of Ultron's narrative. First, he was not created by Pym's hand, but by the MCU's leading technological expert, Tony Stark. Second, as Ultron becomes self aware and attacks the Avengers in robot form, he releases his conscience into the world wide web to escape. The availability of contemporary technology meant that Ultron was even more dangerous than in his original iteration and that many of the things he carried out in the comics would be now seen as possible due to new technology. In a world where almost everything that humans consume is somehow connected to the internet, Ultron could make himself omnipresent by traveling through infinite lines of communication. Finally, Ultron's obsession with his creator was passed on to Stark, but instead of it being a familial feud, it translated mostly into a difference in working philosophies. Stark wanted to save people through efforts such as The Avengers, which Ultron understood to be just another prolongation of the status quo. Ultron was willing to go further and destroy humanity in order to save everyone from future suffering. Yet, the familial subtext is still present in a scene where a deal is made between Ultron and a black market weapons seller. During the exchange, Ultron says some words that remind the dealer of Tony Stark. The dealer then compares Ultron to Stark and causes Ultron to enter a state of indignation in which he could not believe nor accept that he and Stark were somehow alike. In that moment, Iron Man arrives along with

the Avengers and says, “Aw, junior. You’re going to break your old man’s heart” (Whedon).

### *3.8. Closing*

Superhero narratives prolong their existence through changes brought about historical and social progressions. They, as the authors who purport them, are living things that absorb their environment and adapt them accordingly. In this aspect, they resemble a language and how they are in a constant state of evolution. But superhero narratives do not just behave like languages, they also carry language within them. Hence, the modifications they withstand do not just affect the message they carry, but they also affect the form in which they carry the message.

One cannot separate a superhero narrative from its purpose to entertain, much like the mythological or metaphorical narratives that came before. Since the ancient Greeks coined the term “myth” and, as consequence, the practice, these narratives have been the subject of literary and oral competitions. Writers would retell a story and add language that would make it relevant to the listener or reader’s interests. In modern times, superhero narratives are part of an industry that is expected to deliver stories to meet demand. They manifest through a number of outlets that range from television, theater, film, and books among others. An interesting line of study would be the effect of industry in myth-making. How does the high quantity of demand and mediums affect a myth’s development either negatively or positively. Furthermore, one could also trace the trajectory of classical myths and



compare them with the trajectory of modern superhero narratives in order to measure their lasting effects on cultures. Does one style prevail over the other? And so on.

Comic books, by some sort of divine will, have been endowed with the task to carry on with the mythological tradition in the form of superheroes. These characters carry the lore of past heroic traditions from a myriad of cultures in their composition. Thomas Schatz, professor of communication at the University of Texas, establishes that “forms” or tropes (literary or other) such as the hero genre continuously go through an “evolutionary cycle” that innovates in its own path, but at the same time, keeps an eye out for the ground it has already covered:

...a form passes through an *experimental* stage, during which its conventions are isolated and established, a *classic* stage, in which the conventions reach their “equilibrium” and are mutually understood by artist and audience, [a stage] of *refinement*, during which certain formal and stylistic details embellish the form, and finally a *baroque* (or ‘mannerist’ or ‘self-reflexive’) stage, when the form and its embellishments are accented to the point where they themselves become the “substance” or “content” of the work (qtd. in Coogan 195).

In the case of the comic book superhero, its roots were embedded in tropes that extended from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to the pulp hero Tarzan. The jump to a different medium, be it comic books or film, is seen as an innovation that, with time, becomes part of the norm or, as Schatz mentioned, “the ‘substance’ or ‘content’ of the work.” This is not to say that comic books or superhero stories are destined to follow a structuralist path. Not at all. Certain elements and a large tendency among comic book writers to use past narratives have given comics the appearance of a structuralist nature, but it

does not reflect the totality of the medium. The evolutionary cycle refers to the constant borrowing and renewing of language from the past so that new, more modern narratives can be made for contemporary audiences. The scheme also implies that tropes have to be in constant adaptation to please the audience. A trope jumps from the *experimental* stage to the *classic* stage not just because it evolves at free will, but because they *must* evolve in order to stay relevant and be consumed.

Schatz' scheme can also be witnessed in languages or things that behave like languages. The Marvel mythologies have gone through a number of cycles to reach the cultural standing they have today. Throughout the decades, they have been translated into video games, television series, board games, and trading cards, among others. Each form served to push the narrative into a new evolutionary level where the other forms could not reach. The process is comparable to translation because the mythological narrative retains its essence while embracing elements of the new setting and, along with it, the opportunity to innovate:

The stability of a literary system does not depend on the tendency to change, that is the more it changes the more unstable it is; it depends on its capacity for assimilating change. If it can assimilate change, it is stable. Translation can either bring innovation or reinforce the established canon, depending on the place which the literary work occupies in the new literary system (Rion 168).

In our recent history, big-budget films and television series have been at the forefront of translating the Marvel mythological narratives for new audiences. These have evolved in front of our very own eyes to reach near-identical comic book fashion. They have done so because consumers have demanded so

ever since the first Marvel film was released. Luckily, the nature of the mythological narratives also grant them the ability to adapt in cases where consumers would stop demanding and simply grow tired of them. In this case, they would return to other stages of the evolutionary cycle and wait until the day where they are required or expected from again. But, until the day that consumers stop caring for Marvel myths and mythologies in general, translators will have their hands full with many more adaptations and films to come.

# Conclusion

In an article titled “Looking High and Low at Comic Art” that was published in the *American Art* journal by The University of Chicago Press, author Katherine Roeder reiterates the lack of academic recognition for comic books as valid cultural representatives and points to an insufficient categorization of the medium as both the source for their continuous value and the erroneous perception of them among the public:

Though comics are among the most democratic and accessible forms of visual culture, scholars have paid scant attention to how comics function as dense cultural objects

[...]

As mass-cultural products, comics often espouse dominant cultural values, yet their conflicted status as devalued “low” art also encourages a strain of anarchic humor and anti-authoritarian sentiment

[...]

Not only is there a wealth of unstudied topics to pursue relating to comic art makers, collectors, and audiences, but many scholars are finding comics to be effective tools for research on any number of topics —useful primary sources that can shed light on commonly held cultural attitudes and values (5, 6, and 8)

The argument of “high” versus “low” art that the author references is the same that pits classical works of art against modern works and deems the first more “complex” or “pure” due to their place in a literary canon of study (purely aesthetic reasons). Yet, the second is placed in the “low” art section due to their nature of serving more practical means (an entertainment industry). Comics and every other mass-produced medium are placed in the second category due to them serving a popular demand. But, unlike film, which has been granted an exit from the “low” art category by scholars who validated them through open discussions, comics have yet to obtain their stamp of approval.

In addition, Roeder echoes the notion that the lack of recognition has granted comics both advantages and disadvantages in their development as a medium. For example, it is the mischaracterization of comics as a “low” art which allows them to be imbued with cultural references from the immediate context and progressive ideals that are seen as avant-garde. On the other hand, it is this very same trait that causes the unexperienced to regard the medium as “childish” or “unstable.” The language of comics, as we have seen in our dissertation, has its own way of coding information that may seem alien to others; one which makes use of both text and images. One cannot approach comics the same way one approaches a work of prose. As the Spanish literary critic and writer Antonio Altarriba once commented during a keynote speech celebrated in Valencia, Spain, comics are not simply “a reading,” they are, rather, “an exploration of reading” (Cifuentes). This is due to the comic language’s various components —narrative style, details, text, panels, colors, backgrounds, typography, and more— that can be subjected to countless forms of contemplation, but that ultimately work as an unified voice in the form of a comic. Thus, they form to approach comics and their study has to come from open perspective that allows for the analysis of independent elements as well as a combination of number of them, whichever suits best at the moment.

Though it might seem ideal for any medium to be analyzed from a myriad of disciplines, the same cannot be said when seeking to canonize or establish a standard for academic research. In fact, much of the criticism of comic studies deal with “what is being left out” in order to focus on a specific angle. We are certain that this dissertation will be subjected to commentary by

those who will believe that our definition of language was too broad in practice. The same would suggest that we simply analyze the textual language and trace how that was ultimately influenced or affected by the evolving cultural context. Others, like Katherine Roeder, would suggest an emphasis on the artistic-visual aspect and analyze the publications on the basis of art movements from the sixties and how they were reflected in the comics. These are all valid approaches that deserve their studies and we encourage anyone to follow suit with them.

Concerning the superhero genre as an homologous but not synonymous part of comics, they too have fallen into the neglect of academics for very similar —if not the same— reasons. They have been regarded as “low” mythologies ever since their first appearance and have followed the overlooked path of comics history since then. Yet, like with other comic book genres, they carry much of a culture’s identity within them. Be they functioning as a product of history, social classes, racial tensions, or other political movements within a given context, the superhero metaphor is used for a specific form of artistic expression whose motives cannot be denied any longer. It cannot be divorced from its linguistic roots any more than from its place in American culture. They are as much a part of the nation’s history as the evolution of the English language. To say that superheroes are the “modern mythologies” is not a mere statement based on a high cultural presence. Behind it all, there is a real cycle of constant borrowing and adapting that mirrors a language’s evolutionary process. Because of this (and many other reasons), they should be regarded academically along with the other

storytelling art forms. Like with other genres, the focus should not lie in a specific trope (for example, the superhero itself), but on the way that the trope is used as a vessel for cultural sentiments; what its constructions allows the artist to manifest on the page; what advantages or disadvantages does it have from other literary tropes. Centering on only one aspect would suppose the same conclusions that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* would have had if literary analysts would have just focused on the monster and not on the possible interpretations that it held. This, we firmly believe, would help create a strong academic case for comics and the superheroes that frequently inhabit their pages.



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