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‘must we *all* remain helpless?’: Superman vs. the Nuclear Threat in the Late Cold War

By Rui Lopes

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1

In March 1985, a comic book hit the stands with a cover that featured the iconic hero Superman as the sole survivor of a nuclear war, surrounded by debris, under dark clouds, holding a handful of dust and shouting in despair, his words emphatically lettered (Fig. 1).^[1]

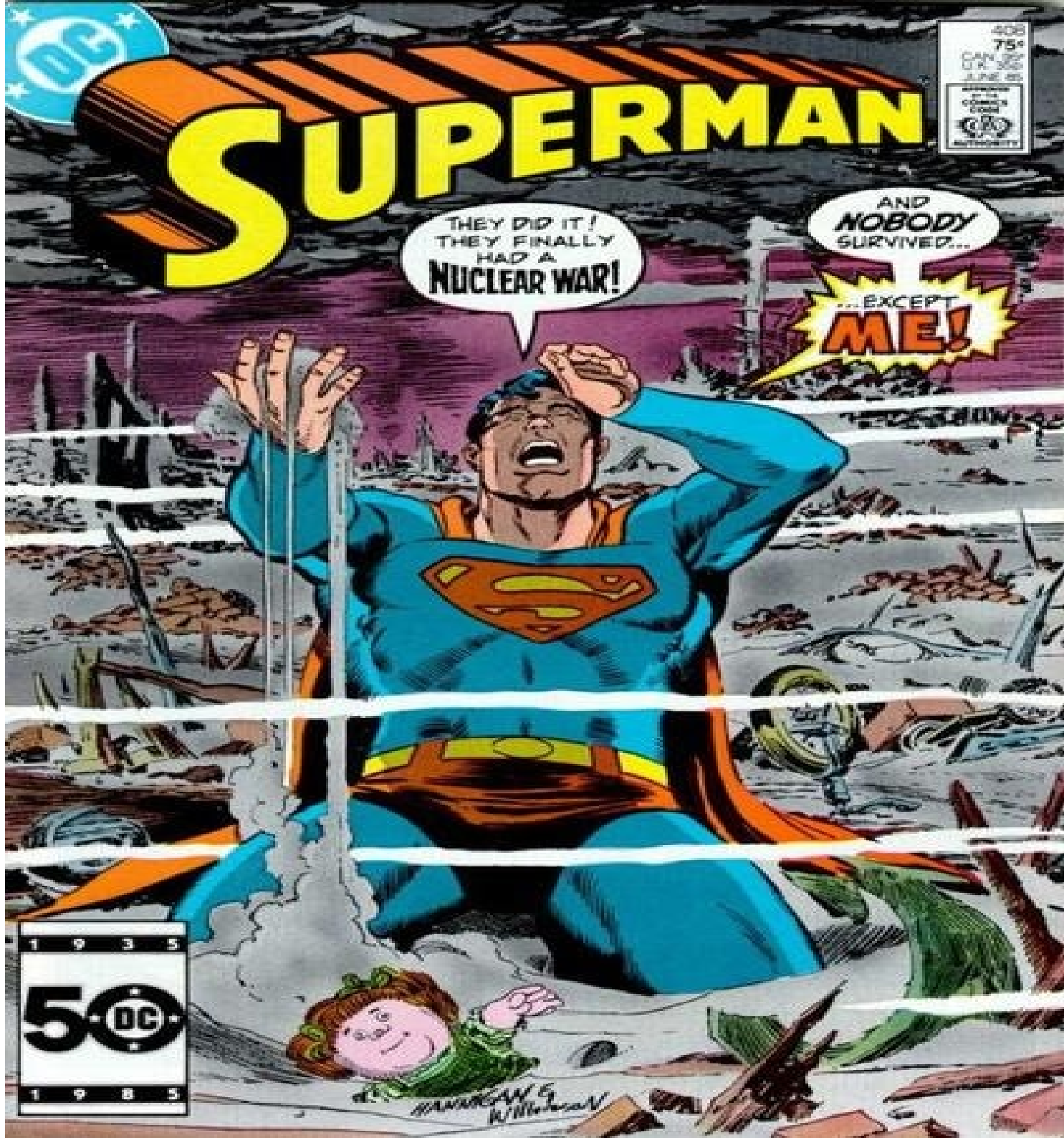


Fig. 1: Hannigan, Ed (p), Al Williamson (i), 'The Day the Earth Died!', *Superman* v1 #408 (May 1985), DC Comics: Cover.

2

The outcome of a military conflict between the world's superpowers—the United States of America (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)—was thus shown to break the spirit of the so-called Man of Steel. Superman's cry and kneeled-down pose evoked Charlton Heston's closing monologue in the post-apocalyptic film *Planet of the Apes* (1968). Colorist Anthony Tollin rendered the image more striking by pitting the vibrant primary colors of Superman's costume and logo (as well as the word balloon with the word "ME") against a grim background of violet radiation and gray ashes and smoke. This chromatic choice, like the half-buried doll in the foreground, highlights the contrast between playful, childlike innocence and the bleak prospects of the late Cold War.

3

In the following years, a variety of other Superman comics produced vivid imagery related to the likelihood of nuclear holocaust. A perennial Cold War motif, this topic gained a new sense of urgency in the 1980s. The decade began with mounting tension over the recent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Nicaraguan Revolution, and the outbreak of civil war in El Salvador. US President Ronald Reagan stepped up the confrontational rhetoric towards Moscow while championing an unprecedented military buildup, including the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which sought to create a laser-based system to intercept intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).^[2] This encouraged a renaissance of public discussion over the possibility of atomic war. Most prominently, scientists and activists vehemently criticized the arms race, arguing that, on top of the direct victims of a nuclear attack, multiple atomic explosions could create a dark cloud over the Earth that would largely block out sunlight, resulting in devastating consequences for all life on the planet—a phenomenon dubbed ‘nuclear winter’ (Rubinson; Schell).

4

Genre fiction played a role in the public debate. According to psychiatrist Robert Lifton, American society had grown so used to the idea of atomic weapons that it had lost touch with the danger they represented. Consequently, anti-nuclear activists defended the public’s need to reimagine the potential horrors of nuclear conflict in order to act against the threat (Fitzgerald 180). This strategy benefitted from the fact that pop culture absorbed the renewed expectation of war, ushering a cycle of doomsday-themed projects in literature, television, and film (Broderick 41-5; Hänni; Palmer 179-205; Valantin 29-35). The zeitgeist reached the comic book industry, where creators drew on tropes from the most popular genre—superhero adventures—to deliver exuberant, symbol-laden tales. In particular, Superman repeatedly found himself in comics that confronted nuclear proliferation and the threat of war.

5

On the one hand, this was consistent both with the character’s publication history and with his overall characterization. Superman comics, shaped early on by the spirit of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, had traditionally mixed progressivism with establishment-oriented values (Andrae 124-38), the character’s brand of patriotism generally linked to utopian liberal ideals. Notably, these comics had previously engaged with public anxieties about the atomic bomb, going as far back as the 1946 tests at Bikini Atoll (Atkinson 19-29). Superman’s godlike powers and stern morals, in addition to his background as a survivor from a destroyed planet whose major source of weakness was a radioactive element (Kryptonite), made him especially suited to address this topic, with writers recurrently challenging the character with the dilemma of whether to proactively interfere in world affairs or to let humanity decide its destiny.

6

On the other hand, as the property of DC Comics and part of its shared fictional universe, the Man of Steel remained confined to a largely immobilized status quo. Although plots had grown more serialized and politically daring since Umberto Eco’s 1962 essay on the fixed nature of Superman’s narrative development and field of action, by the late eighties there was still truth to Eco’s assertion that this character, for all his power, was ‘obliged to continue his activities in the sphere of the small and infinitesimal modifications of the immediately visible’ (Eco 940). In other words, Superman and those around him could not permanently change their world or its history, since that would undermine DC’s reliance on a circular formula to provide open-ended storytelling—and, thus, open-ended publication—not to mention require adjustments across numerous interconnected series. The open-endedness of the character’s saga was even popularized in the famous intro of the 1940s’ radio show *Adventures of Superman*, according to which the Man of Steel fought ‘a never-ending battle for truth and justice’ (in the following decade, under the auspices of the Cold War, the television version added ‘and the American Way’—Lundegaard). The ‘never-ending’ dimension of his ‘battle’ meant that cautionary tales about nuclear war could not be taken to their final consequences (i.e. obliteration of humanity), just as wish-fulfilment narratives about disarmament could not culminate in an effective end to the arms race.

With such limitations in mind, this article analyzes comics that sought to circumvent the challenges of DC's publishing model, namely three stories depicting the dangers of nuclear warfare and a further set of stories presenting visions of nuclear disarmament. The article argues that creators took advantage of Superman's iconic potential to present a series of provocative—if sometimes heavy-handed—statements, manifesting a lingering fear of atomic conflict even as the Cold War approached its anti-climactic dénouement and a concern with disarmament even after the Nuclear Freeze movement had lost momentum. It concludes that the tension derived from Superman's diegetic inability to end the nuclear threat ultimately became a way to confront the extradiegetic inability to imagine a closure to the arms race.

“The Day the Earth Died!” and Other Apocalyptic Nightmares

8

While the Cold War endgame may retroactively appear relatively peaceful and linear, the insistence of Superman comics on the nuclear threat translated the sense of weariness and uncertainty that accompanied the conflict's final stage, in which Washington was forced to react to the heightened anxieties generated by the first years of Reaganite hardline policies and antagonistic rhetoric. A succession of war scares^[3] helped precipitate a shift in the Reagan administration, which in 1984 announced a concerted effort to improve relations with the USSR based on mutual arms reduction, the institutionalization of dialogue, and collaboration in resolving regional conflicts. Although initially derided as insincere, this reorientation found a crucial counterpart in Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, who came to power in 1985. The results were not immediate, but the superpowers' relations gradually, if hesitantly, began to thaw after their 1985 Geneva summit and, particularly, after the 1986 talks in Reykjavik (Fischer; Hoffman 235-377).

9

It was against this evolving background that, combining familiar genre elements (such as kinetic explosions and overblown pathos) with particularly grotesque designs, creators persistently ushered readers to visualize the deadly, destructive power of nuclear war. In order to do this without effectively plunging the Earth of the DC Universe into a devastating conflict that would have left the planet too damaged for subsequent tales, they often used the imagery of the nuclear threat in contexts that did not directly relate to the Cold War. For example, in *Superman #412*, the Man of Steel hallucinated that he had inadvertently detonated an atomic blast in Metropolis rigged by the evil genius Lex Luthor (Bates 21-22). In *Action Comics #598*, he saved the city from a terrorist attack on a nearby nuclear aircraft carrier, thus justifying a prominent atomic mushroom on the issue's cover (Fig. 2).

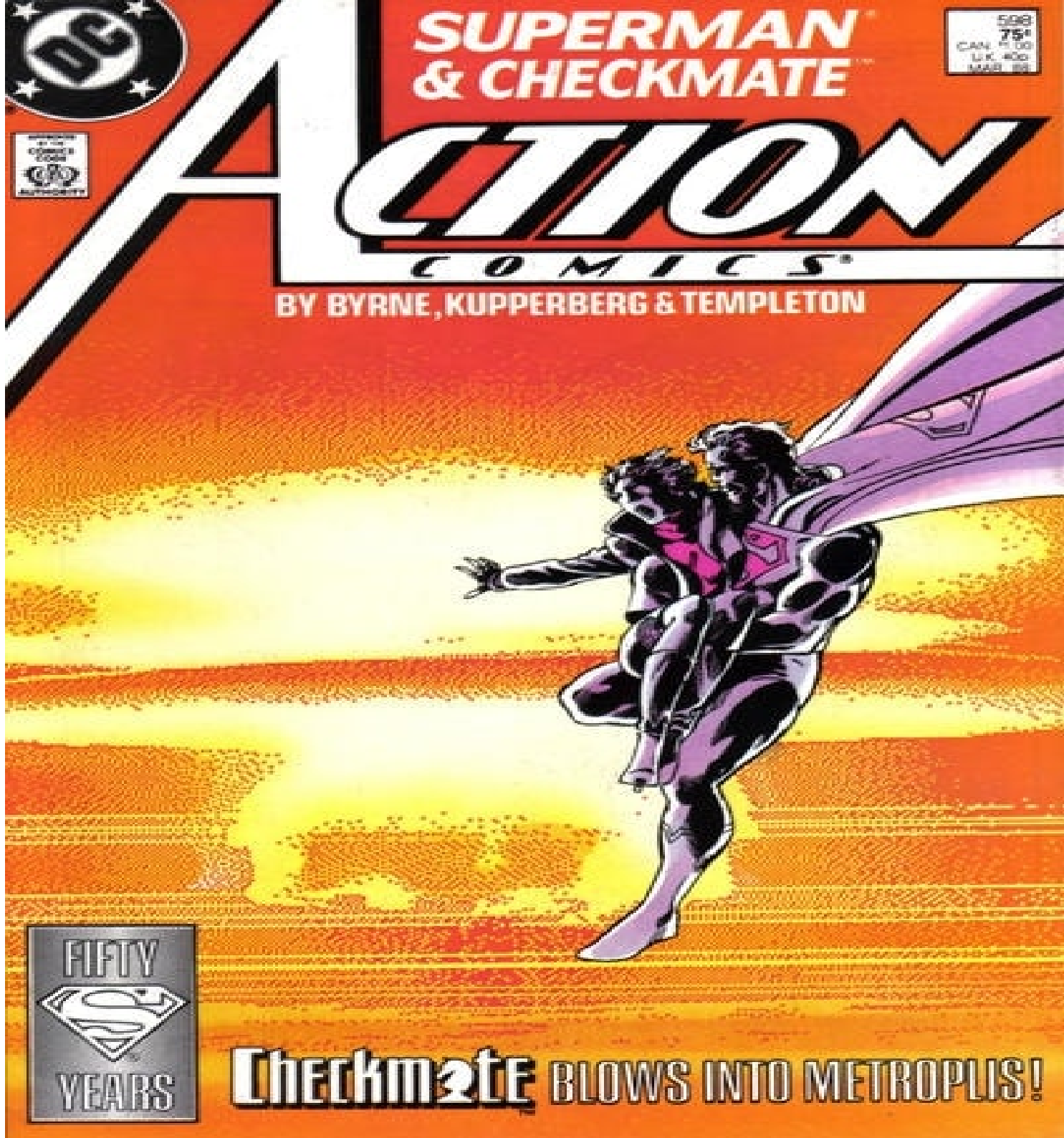


Fig. 2: Byrne, John (a). 'Checkmate' *Action Comics* v1 #598 (Dec. 1987), DC Comics: Cover.

10

A few creators, however, did dramatize the possibility of a military-fueled cataclysm. They did so by depicting it in scenarios beyond the diegetic setting in which Superman's saga was currently taking place, namely in his dreamworld, in non-canonical continuity, and in the comparable history of another planet.

11

The cover described at the beginning of this article tied into a dream sequence from the first story of *Superman #408*, hyperbolically titled 'The Day the Earth Died!' Scripted by Paul Krupperberg from a plot by Ed Hannigan (who also drew the cover), this tale responded to the talks leading up to Geneva by warning against the worst-case scenario of nuclear escalation: on the first page, Superman's alter ego Clark Kent reads a headline announcing that "Nuke Talks Collapse—Soviets walk out as tensions mount";

the second page features high altitude missiles suddenly (according to a caption: ‘There was no warning—’) falling and exploding over the city of Metropolis; the third page depicts the city’s incinerated ruins, the only apparent survivor being an ash-covered Clark; in the fourth page, Superman meets one other survivor, a disfigured child; the fifth page (out of 16) finally reveals this had all taken place in Clark’s dream (a recurring one, according to his thought balloons).

12

The sequence mobilized various elements to emphasize the sense of danger. The frenetic pace (four quick pages took readers from a caricatural upbeat scene in which Clark talked to a cheerful doorman about the nice weather to the image of a girl’s decomposing face in a post-apocalyptic wasteland) suggested that war could break out at any moment and quickly result in genocide. The sensationalist title (Earth itself did not die in the story) was emphatically spread in bold red letters on the bottom of the second page under the falling missiles, thus appearing to label the specific time of the attack. The strike itself was reduced to that one splash and then confined to an ellipsis, as the following page already illustrated its aftermath, starting with long horizontal panels full of smoldering ruins (all the more resonant because the remaining architectural features were consistent with Metropolis’ traditional role as an ersatz-New York City). In superimposed captions, Kupperberg’s omniscient narration highlights the swiftness of the destruction by contrasting it with the lengthy process that had led to the city’s construction, thus describing nuclear war as a counter-movement to the rise of civilization.^[4]

13

The fourth page (Fig. 3) heightened the suitably nightmarish mood. It started off with a disorienting image of Superman—framed through a Dutch angle—wandering through the smoke and debris before wrapping up in a surreal encounter where time seemed to accelerate, as the child’s skin—preserved so far—suddenly rotted away, presaging the upcoming reveal about the oneiric framework of the whole sequence. Both Superman’s despair and the girl’s grotesque features came across as especially harrowing because the interior art was penciled by Curt Swan and inked by Al Williamson, two veterans of the medium with a relatively grounded, naturalistic style.



Fig. 3: Kupperberg, Paul, Ed Hannigan (w), Curt Swan (p), Al Williamson (i), 'The Day the Earth Died!', Superman v1 #408 (May 1985), DC Comics, 4.

14

Besides the swiftness and impact of nuclear annihilation, the key theme of the comic, as established in this sequence, was Superman's feeling of guilt over the fact that he had not prevented the attack. The third page finished with a panel reminiscent of Hannigan's cover—Superman on his knees, tears in his eyes—but it made the theme more explicit, as the protagonist (here with his superhero logo obscured by Clark's torn clothes, underlining his vulnerability) openly voiced his frustration: "I could have stopped it... I'm **Superman!** I should have **done** something..." As shown in Fig. 3, the sequence then culminated in the image of a cadaveric girl pointing an accusing finger at the Man of Steel—an image, as readers soon found out, created by Clark's own subconscious.

15

Instead of reducing the nuclear strike to a bad dream, the most high-profile comic to feature Superman published during this period followed the markedly different route of placing such a strike in a possible future for the DC Universe, thus avoiding affecting present-day continuity. Written and drawn by Frank

Miller, 1986's prestige mini-series *The Dark Knight*—about an older Batman and Superman—featured a Cold War subplot that came to the forefront in the final part of the story. Scattered excerpts of newscasts let readers know that Soviet destroyers had been sighted near the Central American island of Corto Maltese ('Triumphant' 37), that related US-USSR talks broke down (with Soviet representatives terming US military support for the island's regime as 'fascist aggression' ['Hunt', 9]), that there was massive Soviet arms buildup in the waters surrounding Corto Maltese (14), and that American and Soviet troops finally engaged in direct combat (15). The effect was more than narrative foreshadowing: these elliptical references buried in a barrage of panels simulating television screens conveyed the sense that news stories lost in the cacophony of US media could at any moment prove to be omens of war.

16

If the warning against the danger of war in *Superman #408* was not necessarily out of sync with the Reagan presidency (which had begun to recognize the imperative of arms talks), *The Dark Knight* was more scathingly cynical about the current government. Although Corto Maltese was a fictional place (a homage to Hugo Pratt's series of the same name), Miller did not provide further details about the crisis' origins and evolution, suggesting how evident he considered to be the parallel with "real-world" Cold War disputes. Relying on this awareness, Miller presented the information satirically: while American television reports stressed Soviet agency, the US President (who resembled Reagan) betrayed Washington's brinkmanship by winking at viewers as he discussed the possibility of nuclear war, bragging: 'Meanwhile, don't you fret... We've got **God** on our side... or the next best thing, anyway...' ('Hunt' 15). This last line referred to Superman, whom *The Dark Knight* depicted as having become a dutiful enforcer of Washington's foreign policy.

17

Yet if the Man of Steel personified US military superiority, by extension he also came to represent the limits of American power. After Superman destroyed the Soviet aircraft, tanks, and battleships in Corto Maltese (Miller, 'Hunt' 16, 26, 31), the USSR withdrew its forces and launched a nuclear warhead against the US troops in the island. An anchorwoman and a presidential advisor suggested this could be considered a first strike, implying American retaliation, but the president confidently responded: 'Let's see what our little deterrent can do' ('Falls' 13), implicitly equating Superman with the SDI. Superman veered the giant missile towards a desert, where it detonated away from people. However, this was an advanced warhead able to generate an electromagnetic pulse strong enough to disrupt electrical devices across the US (11-16). The sequence that followed, therefore, illustrated how even a scenario involving the interception of a limited nuclear attack could have damaging effects.

18

Miller addressed the intricate web of political, social, and environmental implications by alternating between small panels with character moments and larger panels emphasizing the grand scale of events. The excerpt in Fig. 4 combined wide images of the explosion, separate captions with Batman's thoughts addressed to Superman (criticizing the military-industrial complex), and a four-panel tier zooming in on Dan Rusk, a reporter in a space shuttle.

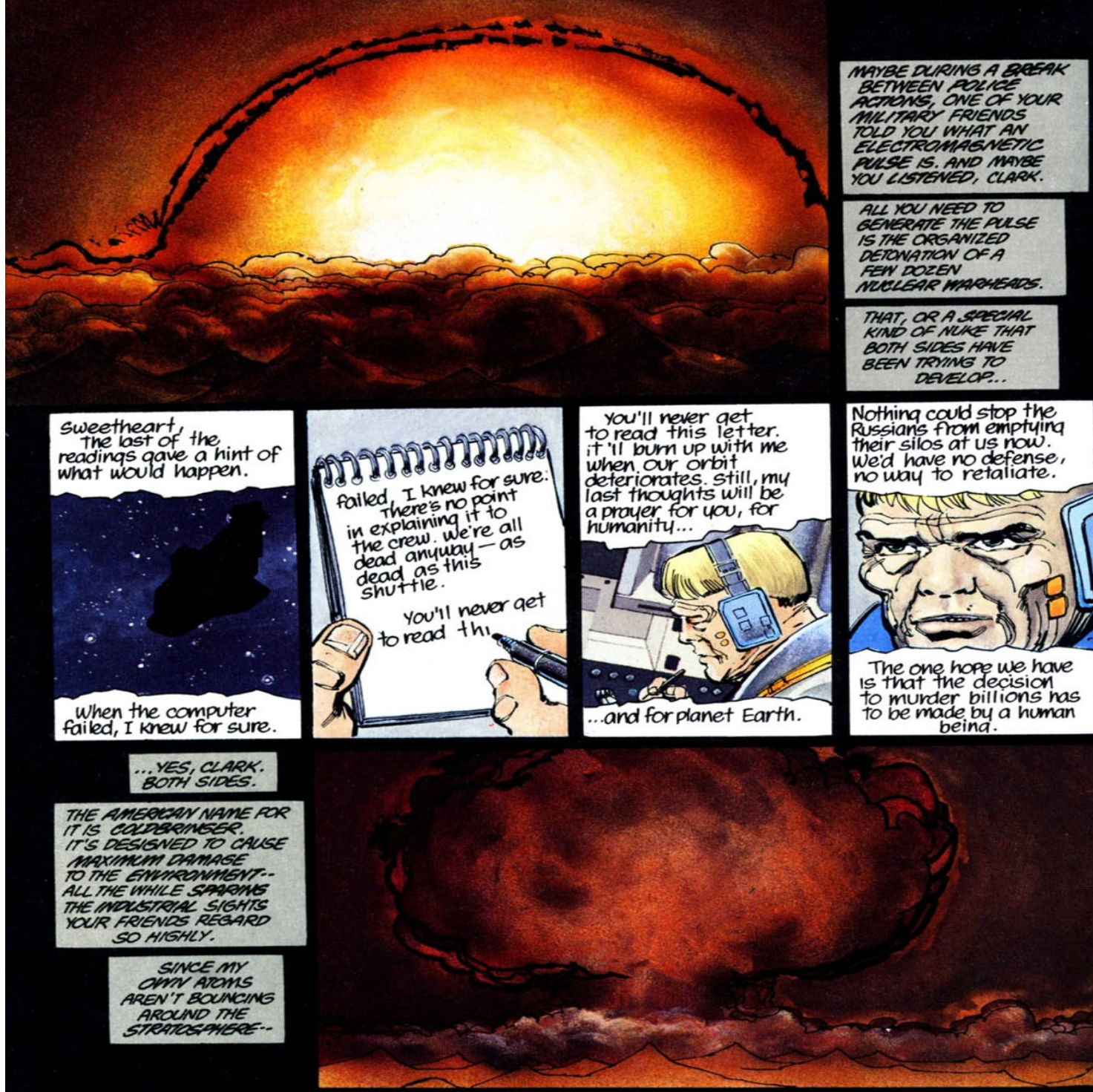


Fig. 4: Miller, Frank (w,p), Klaus Janson (i). 'The Dark Knight Falls', *The Dark Knight* #4 (Jun. 1986), DC Comics, 16.

19

Several artistic choices underscored the shifts in perspective. Colorist Lynn Varley used a darker tone for the explosions than for the scene inside the shuttle. Batman's and Rusk's captions had different colors, borders, and fonts. This multiplicity of points of view and narrative devices—reflecting the magnitude of the chain of overlapping events set off by the attack—continued in the following pages, which showed a blacked-out Gotham City descending into chaos ('Falls' 17-32).

20

In an interview published in 1991, Miller clarified that his refusal to depict a full-scale nuclear exchange and a subsequent post-apocalyptic adventure—along the lines of the *Mad Max* film series—was rooted in his awareness that if 'that exchange ever happened, there just wouldn't be any humans left alive' (Sharrett 40). While avoiding such a scenario, however, he still incorporated the "nuclear winter" theory into the book: according to a newscast, the bomb's blast thrust hundreds of millions of tons of soot into the stratosphere, creating a black cloud that covered the Americas. One week later, weather patterns remained

disrupted across the hemisphere, with darkness at noon and snow in August. Deprived of light and heat, people were freezing by the thousands and the damage to crops could bring on a famine. The US President imposed martial law as cities across the country were caught in the grip of panic ('Falls' 17-19).

21

Like US military superiority, the environmental dimension gained a resonant symbol in the form of Superman. Since this hero's powers derived from sunlight, he was affected not only by his proximity to the explosion but also by the fact that the sand thrust into the sky blotted out the source of his strength. Rising from the flames, Superman tried to process the enormity of the ecological catastrophe.^[5] After mourning the loss of the desert's wildlife, the deflated superhero begged his adopted planet to spare humanity from even graver consequences: 'you have every **reason** to be **outraged**, Mother Earth... you have given them... **everything**... they are **tiny** and **stupid** and **vicious**... but **please**... **listen** to them...' (Miller, 'Falls' 25). Superman then tried to reach sunlight by flying above the clouds but failed because of a magnetic storm (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Miller, Frank (w,p), Klaus Janson (i). 'The Dark Knight Falls', *The Dark Knight* #4 (Jun. 1986), DC Comics, 26.

The splash on the left side of Fig. 5 turned Superman into a symbol of environmental destruction by depicting this typically forceful and handsome character as vulnerable and grotesque (in contrast to the sequence from *Supermam* #408, it was now the Man of the Steel himself—and not an anonymous dream child—who resembled a zombie). The background colors and the lightning bolt created a direct visual link with the disruption of the planet's magnetic field caused by the nuclear explosion. The sequence on the right side of the page pointed to a different type of consequence: having fallen on a jungle, Superman absorbed solar energy from a flower (an extrapolation of photosynthesis) and proceeded to drain the

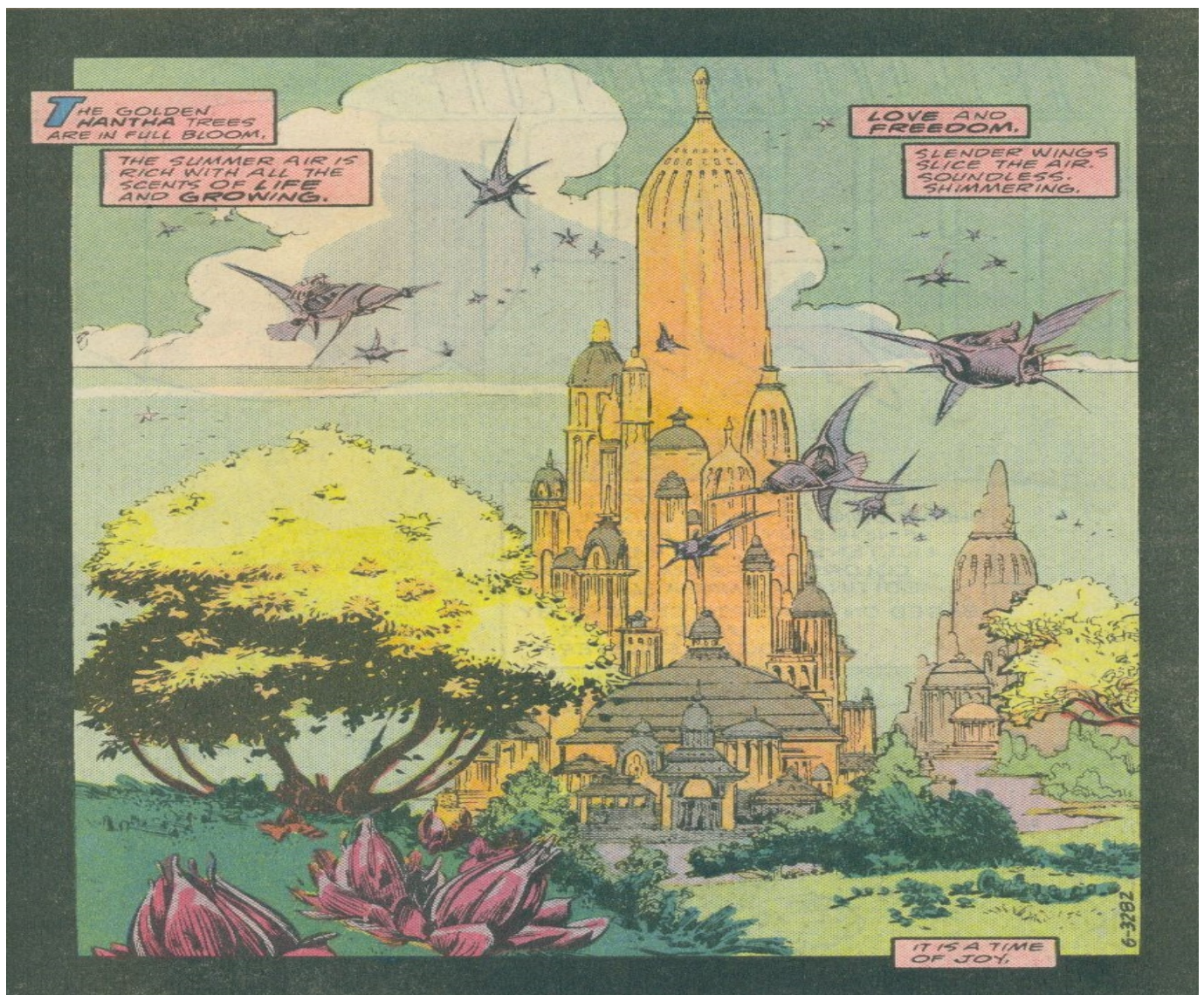
whole jungle, which withered around him. Superman, like humanity, was ultimately able to survive, but only at the expense of further ecological sacrifice.

23

On an even more removed metaphorical level, the 1987 mini-series *The World of Krypton* took advantage of a recent reboot of DC continuity to revise the history of Superman's home planet, reimagining it as a place ravaged by war. Although the politics of the conflict in Krypton bore little resemblance to the Cold War (it originated in an uprising over clones' rights), this overhaul linked familiar elements of the Superman mythos to imagery evocative of the nuclear threat. The capital city of Kandor—which longtime readers might know as a city miniaturized by the villain Brainiac and the setting of many earlier Superman adventures (Hamboussi)—was now shown to have been decimated by an atomic explosion (Byrne, 'After the Fall' 10, 'History Lesson' 5). The longstanding portrayal of Krypton as a scientific utopia where art deco buildings and futuristic technology coexisted with fantastical creatures and colorful vegetation now fueled a parable about ecological and civilizational devastation. [6]

24

The opening pages of the first three issues encapsulated this shift by depicting the same sight, from the same angle but centuries apart. Through the lyrical narration written by John Byrne, the harmonious mix of wild nature, majestic architecture, and flying machines drawn by Mike Mignola and Rick Bryant, and the bright, languid hues colored by Petra Scotese, the first issue's splash (Fig. 6)—set just before the war—resembled the traditional utopian image of Krypton. The one in the second issue (Fig. 7)—set more than a thousand years later—then stood in stark contrast: a markedly grimmer narration, drawings of charred ruins and naked trees, and a darker palette (including shades of violet that evoked the specter of radiation) conveyed the war's lasting impact.



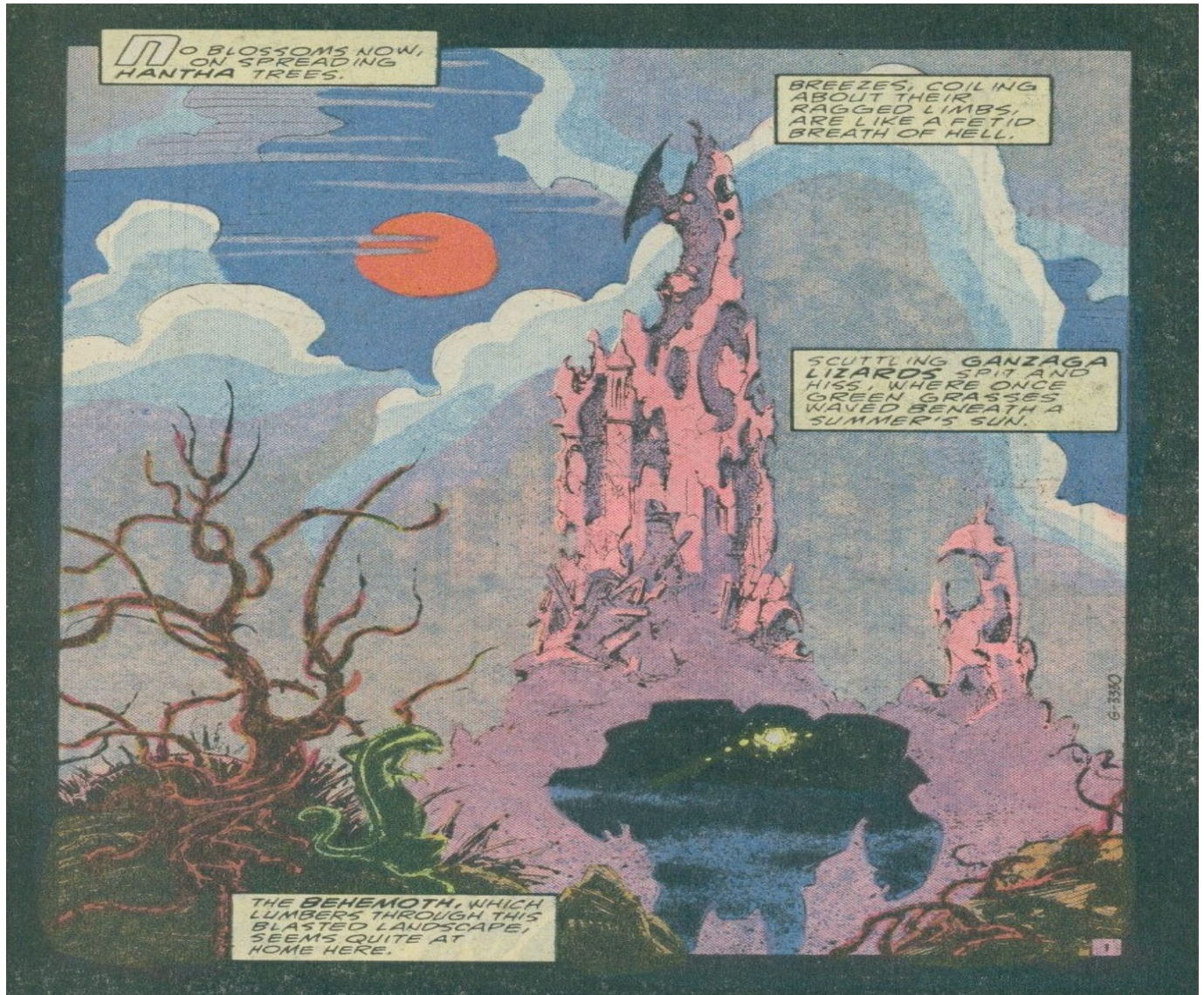


Fig. 7: Byrne, John (w), Mike Mignola (p), Rick Bryant (i). 'After the Fall', World of Krypton v2 #2 (Sep. 1987), DC Comics, 1.

Using the freedom granted by the extraterrestrial setting, Byrne's plot managed to encompass the damage of nuclear war even in case of human survival (like in *The Dark Knight*) and a scenario of total annihilation (like in *Superman #408*) while inscribing both elements into the core of Superman's continuity. The third issue—starting with a splash set a thousand centuries after the first one's—showed that, although the survivors' descendants had eventually established a new ultra-technological civilization, Krypton's plant life had permanently given way to barren deserts and the once joyful community had given way to a reclusive society. If—as per the Figs. 6 and 7—before the war the summer air was 'rich with all the scents of **life** and **growing**,' and in its aftermath the breezes became 'like a fetid breath of hell,' now 'the air is desert hot, and if there are any scents to ride its curling breezes, no human nose is ever present long enough to tell' (Byrne, 'History Lesson' 1). Thus, in the revised version of Superman's backstory, he was no longer the product of a colorful utopia, but of a somber, sterile dystopia—a point underlined by the population's replacement of the bright Kryptonian garments with tight black suits covering everything but the faces and fingers. Furthermore, according to *The World of Krypton*, a warring faction had launched a nuclear bomb into the planet's core, generating a chain-reaction that first produced deadly radiation and ultimately led to Krypton's explosion. This recast the much-revisited image of Krypton shattering behind the rocket carrying the baby who would become Superman ('Family History' 23) into an indictment of nuclear warfare.

“The Quest for Peace’ and Other Dreams of Disarmament

26

More than casting doubt on the political evolution taking place at the highest level, the comics’ nuclear fixation spoke to the fear that, as long as atomic weapons were an option, a devastating war remained on the horizon. This view echoed the stance of the anti-nuclear movement, which had grown rapidly in the early 1980s. At the time, various strands of activism (with multiple focuses, strategies, and demands, ranging from arms control to full disarmament) had gathered around the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, demanding a bilateral end to further testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons. The campaign did not question the Soviet threat, but it considered nuclear proliferation a threat in itself. This had become a popular position throughout US society early in the decade, with polls indicating that above 60 percent of the population supported a mutual freeze (Kleidman 169).^[7] Mobilization, however, began to flag since 1983, as the Reagan administration diverted the debate with its SDI proposal and co-opted the movement’s rhetoric even before engaging in protracted arms talks with Moscow (Peoples 169-76; Weart 237).

27

Although the heyday of activism had passed, its cause left a mark on popular imagination, including in the field of comic books. In the context of the mid-to-late eighties’ movement in DC towards a more realistic, self-conscious, and politically charged approach to superhero stories—what Geoff Klock labelled the ‘revisionary superhero narrative’ (25-76)—nuclear disarmament became a recurrent example when questioning the heroes’ moral obligation to change the world rather than to protect the status quo. This topic, prominent in DC series such as *Watchmen* (Moore), *Justice League* (Giffen), and *Firestorm, the Nuclear Man* (Ostrander), also found a place in comics about Superman, who—regardless of his characterization as an acritical servant of Washington in *The Dark Knight*—rather than fully identify with US imperialism, often came across as exasperated with war.

28

Again, the tendentially open-ended format of this character’s narratives discouraged the possibility of closure: if in theory the Man of Steel had the power to physically destroy all weapons, in practice he was unlikely to do so, as that would have created a radically altered reality to which other DC series would have had to adjust. While, as seen in the previous section, alternate continuities provided an opportunity to escape this paradox, writers instead chose to embrace it by stressing the obstacles to disarmament that even Superman would have to face, including, among others, the military-industrial complex, the Cold War security dilemma, and the reluctance of national leaders to give up power.

29

One story that engaged with this question in quite explicit terms was the aforementioned ‘The Day the Earth Died!’: following the nightmare of the first four pages, Superman pondered if he should dismantle the world’s nuclear arsenals. Atypically, the tale had little external plot, consisting mostly of Superman’s inner reflections (even the dynamic opening had taken place inside his mind), often directly stated in text-heavy thought balloons. For the most part, the art team of Swan and Williamson stuck to conventional layouts and unimaginative depictions of the hero flying around with a brooding expression, although one sequence did briefly elevate the static script: when the Man of Steel contemplated the challenges of disabling missiles, the art moved from page-wide panels to a three-panel tier in which the abundant text of the hero’s inner monologue became particularly cluttered, the encroaching balloons wrapping Superman in a thick cloud of thought, evoking the overbearing presence of these problems on his mind (Fig. 8).

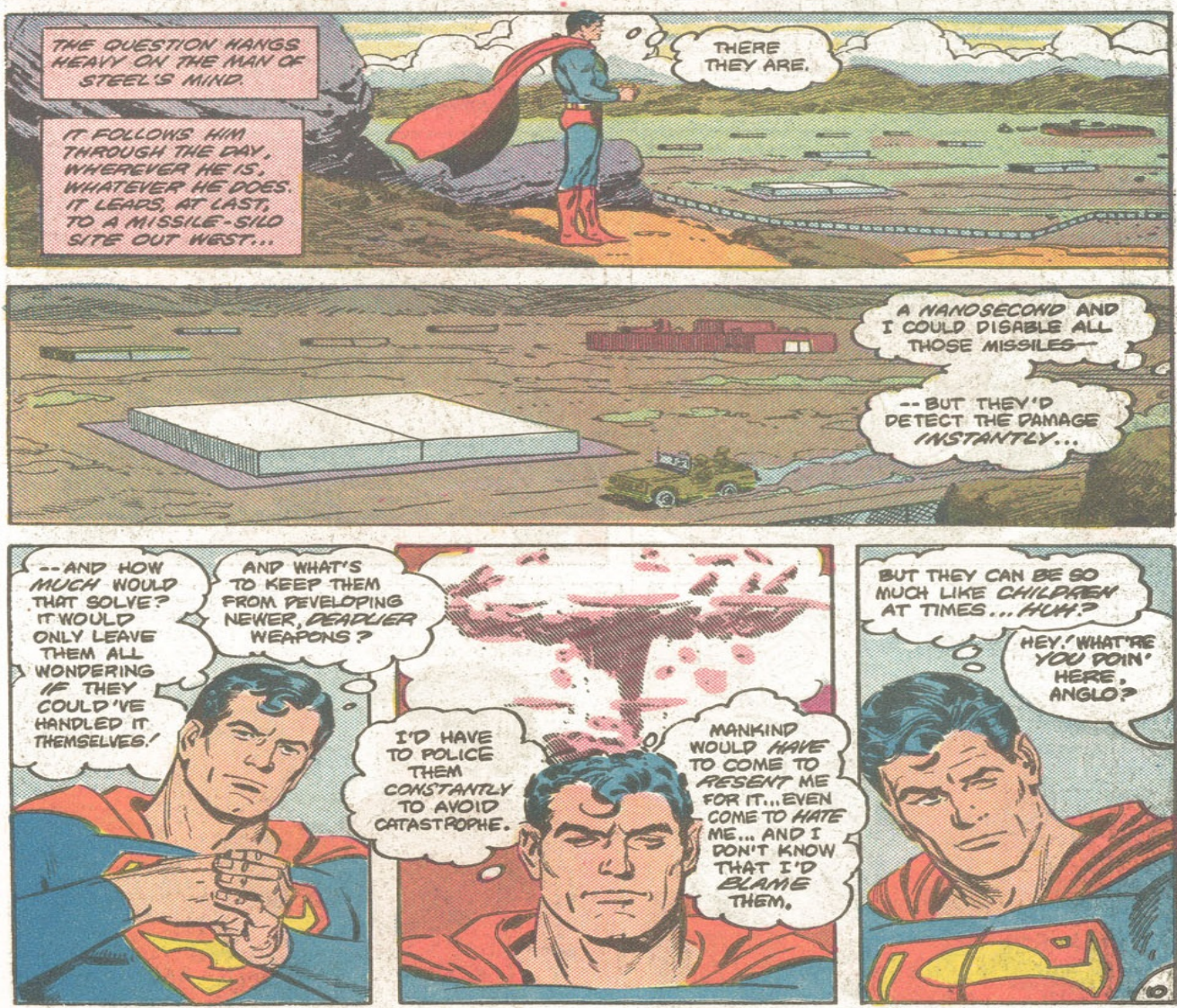


Fig. 8: Kupperberg, Paul, Ed Hannigan (w), Curt Swan (p), Al Williamson (i), 'The Day the Earth Died!', Superman v1 #408 (May 1985), DC Comics, p.10.

30

While the balloons were presumably added by letterer Ed King, one of them appeared to have been placed by the artists, as it portrayed the mushroom of smoke that had become shorthand for an atomic explosion. The mushroom was rendered in an impressionistic style—and colored accordingly by Gene D'Angelo—in contrast to the plain depiction of Superman in the same panel, thus illustrating the clash between the nuanced complexity of problems in the outside world and the simplicity of comic book heroes.

31

Without much in terms of plot, 'The Day the Earth Died!' presented a series of vignettes that prompted Superman's reasoning,^[8] with the notion of childhood as a metaphor for humanity running through the issue. At one point, Superman wondered if humans had the 'maturity' to be trusted with the ability to obliterate the world 'a few thousand times over', musing that 'they're almost *child-like* in their comparison of weapons...each trying to outdo the other with bigger, better "toys"!' (Kupperberg 6). After a conversation with a boy who justified having endangered himself—while trying to recover a baseball—through the importance of not letting the fear of risks run one's life, Superman chose not to take the decision away from humanity. After all, children were not just vulnerable (like the radioactive girl in the dream) and reckless (like the boy going after the baseball), they were also prone to learning: 'Maybe people *are* still like children...but children learn their lessons after they're burned often enough! The nuclear age has *had* its lessons...*Hiroshima... Nagasaki...* maybe they don't *need* another...' (16). These thoughts led Superman to conclude, 'They need every chance to work it out themselves—*without* a Superman to play *mother hen*!' (16).

The hopeful ending could not help but ring like a concession to the series' escapist tone. It did bring balance to the story, with the last panel of the final page featuring a newspaper headline ('Arms Talks Resume—U.S. and Soviets expected to reach accord') that reversed the pessimistic headline of the first page. However, when a fan letter by T.M. Maple asked about the tale's implications in terms of Superman's notions of 'law,' 'justice' and 'peace', editor Laurie Rozakis bluntly replied: 'T.M., you raise some provocative issues. The bottom line, though, is that Superman is a fictional character and thus, unfortunately, anything that he accomplishes in these pages would, by definition, be imaginary' (L. Rozakis).

The same tension was at the center of the unpopular 1987 film *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*, the adaptation of which DC published in the same year, based on the original screenplay^[9] and therefore including slightly different dialogue and material from deleted scenes (B. Rozakis). The tale opened with another breakdown of East-West arms control talks, prompting a small boy called Jeremy to write to Superman requesting him to get rid of all atomic bombs. Thus, this time around, a child's connotation with innocent wisdom incited—rather than deterred—Superman's decision to act. The subsequent failure of his actions could therefore be seen as the failure of naïve, simplistic logic to fix a real and complicated problem.

Unlike *Superman #408*, this tale broke the confines of theoretical interventionism, emphasizing external action, aware that a key appeal of Superman stories was the chance to watch the character perform outlandish, physically impossible stunts. Persuaded that 'the Earth faces a fate as terrible as Krypton's' (B. Rozakis 23), Superman convinced the Pentagon and the Kremlin to launch their ICBMs into space, where he catapulted them into the sun, thereby providing a dynamic set piece, suitably rendered in an elaborate splash page (Fig. 9).

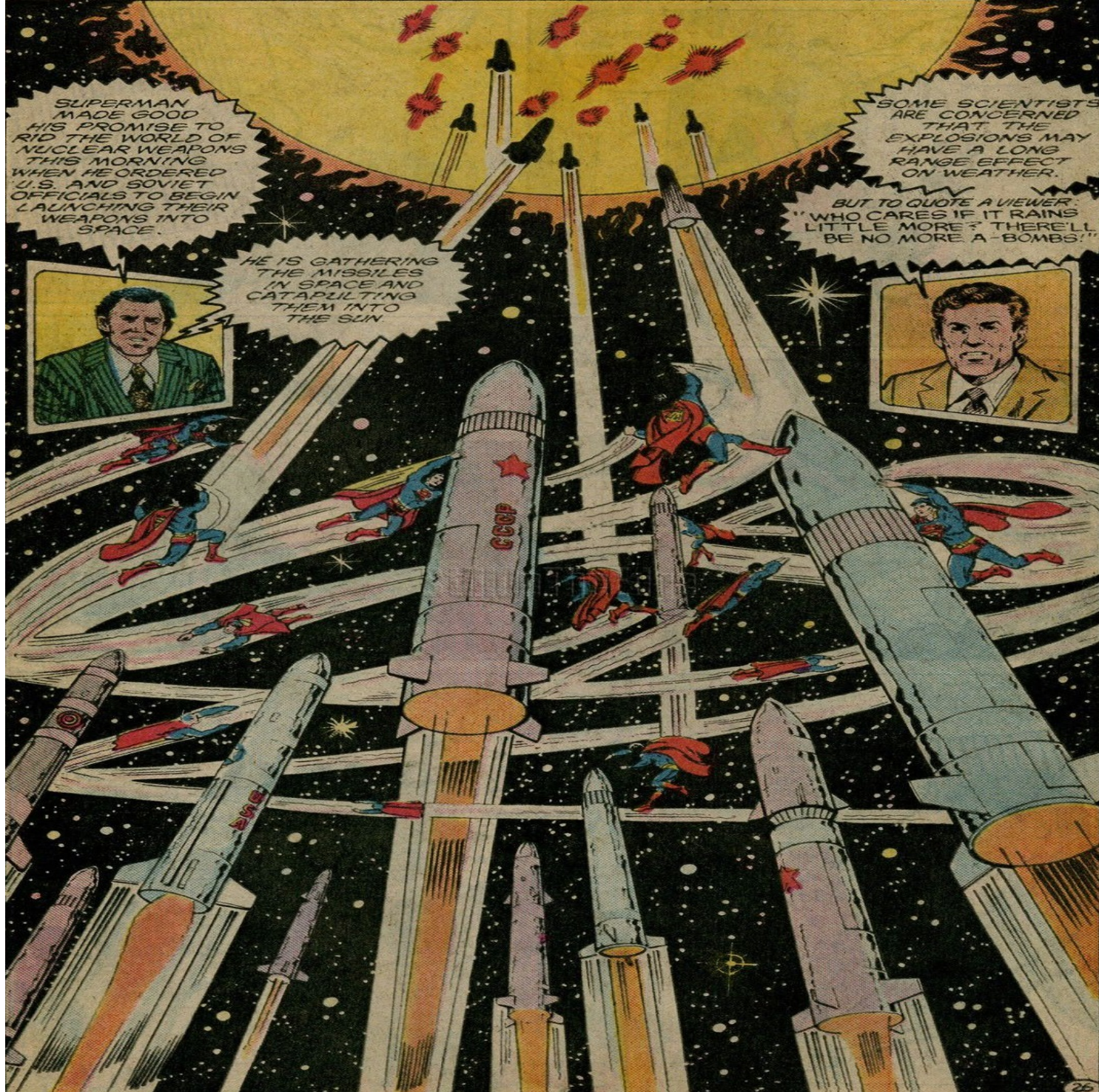


Fig. 9: Rozakis, Bob (w), Curt Swan (p), Don Heck (i). 'Superman IV: The Quest for Peace' Superman IV: The Quest for Peace (Jul. 1987), DC Comics, 26.

35

In an inversion of the traditionally reactionary structure of superhero comics—in which it was typically the villain who sought large-scale social changes and the hero who preserved the status quo (Klock 39)—Lex Luthor set out to undermine the Superman-ushered peace process. He cut a deal with American and Russian hawks, as well as with a French arms dealer, in order to profit from subsequent rearmament. Luthor thus became a symbol of the military-industrial complex, explaining: 'Nobody *wants* a war. However, I'd just like to keep the threat alive' (B. Rozakis 39). Layouts such as the one in Fig. 10 illustrated the power balance by portraying the Pentagon's and the Kremlin's dispositions as ultimately equivalent through equal-size panels with symmetrical designs (along with a symmetrical mise-en-scène and similar dialogue) while presenting warmongers in panels underneath, making them look surreptitious, as if conspiring underground (27, 48, 54).

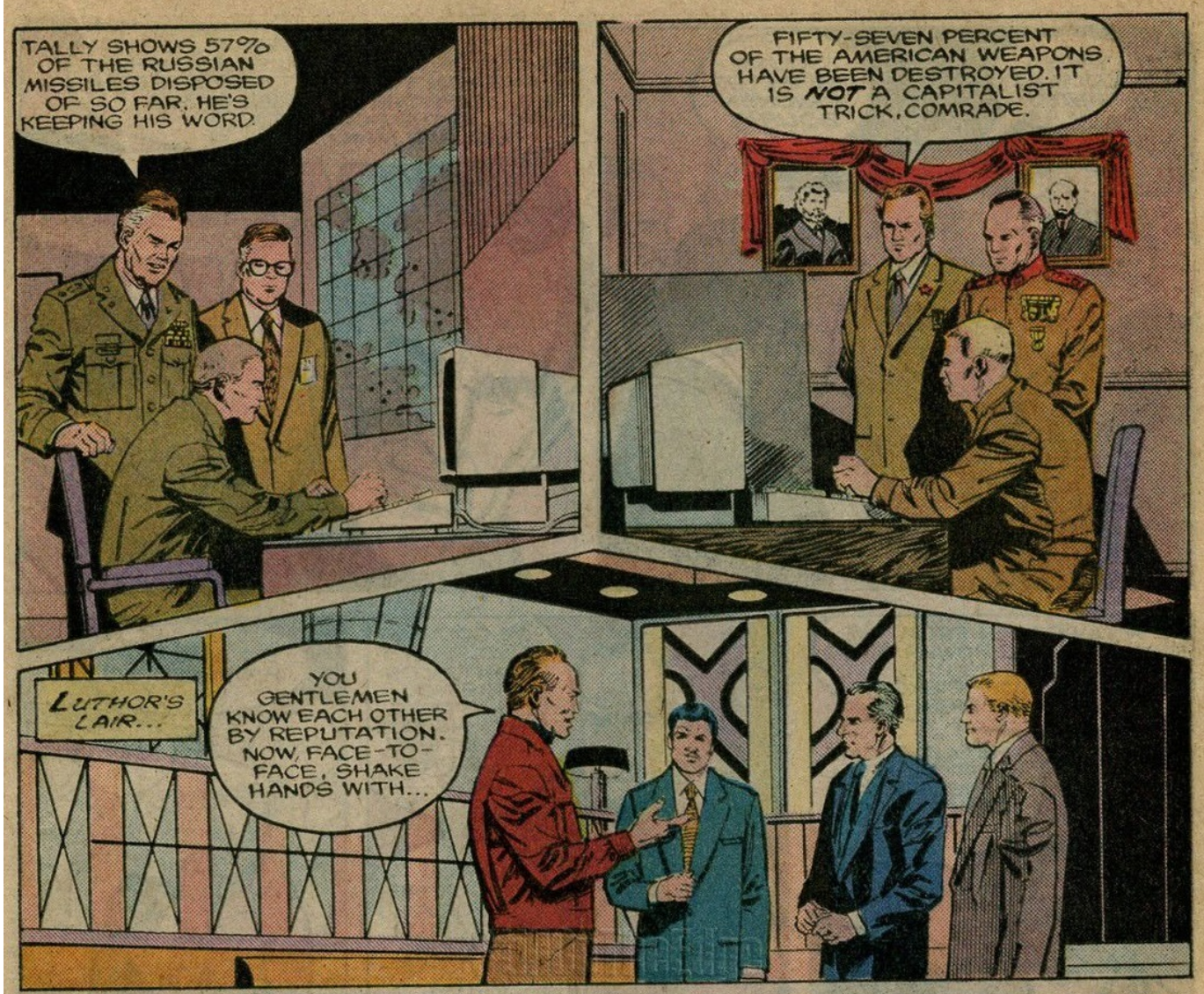


Fig. 10: Rozakis, Bob (w), Curt Swan (p), Don Heck (i). 'Superman IV: The Quest for Peace' *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (Jul. 1987), DC Comics, 27.

36

Providing a further pretext for grandiose action, Luthor created the villain Nuclear Man, who fought and seemingly killed Superman. This led the US and USSR into a new arms race, their paranoia encouraged by Luthor, who argued that neither side could be trusted to keep the peace agreement without Superman to enforce it. When the demented Nuclear Man tried to start a war by changing into a living missile and flying on the superpowers' radars, Superman turned up alive and managed to stop him.

37

Despite the abovementioned reversal of a key superhero convention, the tale never fully departed from its genre trappings, which posed an obstacle to its inspirational message. As pointed out by cartoonist and anti-nuclear activist Leonard Rifas, in order to keep the spotlight on Superman and elevate him as a lone hero, *The Quest for Peace* discouragingly disregarded the existing peace movement, either in the form of street demonstrations or UN debates. It also resorted—through Luthor—to popular stereotypes about greedy 'merchants of death,' thus dramatizing the concern over defense contract profits posing an obstacle to peace 'in a way that directs our attention toward personal vices of greed and insensitivity and away from structural problems' (10). Additionally, Rifas argued that the pacifist message was undermined by the fact that the film and its comic book adaptation did not escape the trope of framing the central action as a peacemaker fighting a warmaker, highlighting that—despite the title—the comic's cover showed 'Superman and the Nuclear Man tussling on the moon' (10).

38

The disconnect between utopian rhetoric and the difficulties of achieving permanent peace within the confines of a Superman story culminated in yet another anticlimactic finale. At the end of *Superman IV*, the hero made an impassioned appeal to world peace, but he announced at the UN that it was not his role to free humanity from war—peace depended on the will of all the governments and all the peoples of the world. Although crediting the story for suggesting that the problem were not nuclear weapons per se, but rather ‘our habits, attitudes, thoughts, and feelings,’ Rifas denounced the pernicious formulation of this sentimental speech: since asking for unanimity as a precondition for peace amounted to saying that peace was impossible, *Superman IV* promoted the illusion ‘that dreaming of peace is all we can do and all we need to do’ (10). In contrast to Rifas’ defeatist reading, however, the acknowledgement that disarmament could not depend on the Man of Steel could be seen as an endorsement of collective action and, crucially, of the pragmatic idea that Superman’s main power was symbolic: while this fantasy character could not destroy real weapons, he could reach out for real people to adopt his fantastic point of view. The final scene—cut from the film but included in the comic—embodied this spirit: Superman flew Jeremy high above the Earth and the boy told all the major news services that from up there—i.e., from Superman’s vantage point—he could see oceans, mountains, and rivers, but no borders between countries, cueing the Man of Steel’s closing line: ‘And when we all see it that way, then there will be no more war’ (B. Rozakis 64).

39

Even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, disarmament remained the one challenge that Superman could not easily overcome, at least by himself. In 1991, DC published a series of annual issues tying into the crossover *Armageddon 2001*, each one envisioning an alternate version of the future of various characters, allowing them—like *The Dark Knight* had done—to take stories in autonomous directions unrestricted by the impact on current continuity. In two of the three Superman comics produced for the occasion, the Man of Steel struggled to end nuclear proliferation. In ‘Execution 2001,’ after a gang attempting to blackmail Metropolis accidentally detonated an atomic bomb that killed Superman’s loved ones, the Man of Steel forcefully destroyed all nuclear weapons, claiming to ‘represent the interests of the innocent’ and of ‘anyone who’s been victimized by petty world leaders’ (Jurgens 21). US President Herbert Forrest (whose name and appearance suggested a parody of then-President George H.W. Bush) refused to regard his country as powerless, so he developed a secret re-arming program and convinced Batman to kill Superman. In turn, ‘Executive Action’ presented a benign future in which Superman was elected president of the US and successfully implemented a liberal agenda addressing social exclusion, environmentalism, and economic stimulus. The only policy that met with outright resistance was his plan for world peace, which included the gradual disarmament of all sovereign nations, with the major powers setting an example ‘by ending their roles as arms merchants’ (Stern 41). The plan led to a violent fight with right-wing superhero Guy Gardner, who voiced an ideological objection to such a path: ‘All you wanna do is *emasculate* the American fighting man! Or am I wrong in thinking that your plan would eliminate our army? Sounds like *treason* to me!’ (42). Months before the collapse of the Soviet Union, creators still refused to imagine that even an alternate future Superman could counter proliferation without vicious political resistance.

Conclusion

40

Stuck in a limbo between utopia and dystopia, the Superman comics discussed in this article repeatedly teased readers with unfulfilled visions of either nuclear holocaust or disarmament. In part, the lack of consummation reflects the constraints of serialized fiction, which left little room for lasting change. Yet many of the stories took place outside of the DC canon, drawing on the resonance of previously established characters without having to worry about the impact on continuity, which suggests that the conservative dictums of the superhero genre more generally may have played a role alongside DC’s publication model. Rather than focus on absence, however, let us consider what the comics did depict. After all, the fact that creators chose to engage with this topic despite the restrictions—like the fact that

they often stressed Superman's limitations, even in tales with greater storytelling freedom—indicates that the abovementioned narrative patterns were informed by wider considerations.

41

For one thing, the comics depicted an impasse—a world that could not be fully destroyed yet neither could it escape the threat of destruction. In other words, they depicted a mindset of the late Cold War, where fears of conflict coexisted with promises of peace, yet a definite ending was still difficult to conceive. While films such as *The Day After* (1983), *Testament* (1983), *When the Wind Blows* (1986), and *Miracle Mile* (1988), with their finite duration and cathartic closing credits, compellingly visualized a climax to the war, Superman stories, with their tradition of decades-long, open-ended narratives, were especially suited to represent the feeling of deadlock. Most readers picking up *Superman #408* knew the Earth would somehow survive (regardless of the misleading title and opening sequence), just as many readers of *The Quest for Peace* (a story that was not set in the same continuity as the regular comics but which was nevertheless an installment in a parallel open-ended franchise) were bound to suspect Superman's disarmament initiative would not last. Yet they were teased by those possibilities before inevitably ending up in the same unresolved situation. While these comics did not discern an end to the Cold War, they depicted anxiety and hope about the shape of the future alongside a sense of endless continuum.

42

Furthermore, the stories polemicized specific views about the nuclear threat. *The Dark Knight* and *The World of Krypton* countered SDI-related assumptions of a winnable war by depicting post-war worlds in which, even if some of the population survived, catastrophic social and environmental breakdown was unavoidable. *Superman #408* and *The Quest for Peace* not only pointed out obstacles to disarmament but they also concluded that the struggle against the arms race had to be a collective enterprise—it required political will at the highest level and it could not rely on the actions of a single individual, much less an imaginary one. The last point was underlined by the dichotomy of the 1991 annuals: when Superman sought to singlehandedly disarm the world. in 'Execution 2001,' the US government had him killed; he was only able to achieve peace in 'Executive Action', when he effectively became the government, imbuing Washington with his liberal values.

43

The key force at the center of these stories was the contrast between Superman's iconic status and the vulnerability he displayed regarding the atomic threat. Since Superman regularly did impossible deeds, the fact that this was a challenge he could not solve made it look all the more insurmountable. Since Superman was known to stand for "truth, justice and the American way," those values were themselves defeated along with his failure. Since Superman had an apolline connection to the sun and a telluric relationship with Earth, his weakness represented environmental danger. Since Superman was typically wholesome and a hero to children—within and outside the comics—his depiction as disformed and/or conflicted equated the nuclear issue with a loss of purity and innocence. The more powerless Superman came across, the more powerful the statement made.

44

This paradox was encapsulated in a brief sequence from the 1985 story 'The Time of Your Life'. When the villain Chronos sent two missiles into the past, Superman chased them across time and, in 1945, prevented one of them from hitting the aircraft Enola Gay, which was about to drop the bomb over Hiroshima. While doing so, Superman's thought balloons pointed out Chronos' cruelty in taunting him with the possibility of unmaking the inauguration of atomic warfare: 'He knows I'd give *anything* to stop the next events from occurring...but I can't let this [missile] alter history's course—no matter how many times I've tried to find a safer, saner path for it to take' (Cavalieri 14). As the plane dropped its bomb,

Superman's narration expressed his frustration ('It's the greatest of my weaknesses.') and a large panel, taking up two thirds of the page, showed him turning away in tears (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11: Cavalieri, Joey (w), Jose Delbo (p), Alfredo Alcala (i). 'The Time of Your Life' *World's Finest Comics* #321 (Aug. 1985), DC Comics, 15.

45

More than suggest that the nuclear attack had been necessary yet regrettable, the contradiction between Superman's choice to preserve the past and his rhetorical question ('In the face of this... must we *all* remain helpless?') suggested the limitations of his fictional reality. Although an earlier version of this hero had fought in World War II, by the mid-1980s Superman had come to de-glorify even the initial American atomic bombing, yet he still could not bring himself to change history into something too distant from the history of the outside world. However, Superman's lack of power did not necessarily signify humanity's lack of power; after all, while Superman could not change events in the material world, the story's adherence to a recognizable reality meant that people in the outside, by changing their material conditions, could transform Superman's mirror universe. Given that, in fig. 11, the Man of Steel was drawn directly facing the reader, his cry could thus be read less as a fatalistic lament than as desperate plea for action.

Notes

- [1]Credits and release dates are taken from <http://www.dcindexes.com/features/search.php> and <http://www.comics.org/> [accessed May 9, 2016]
- [2]Other notable initiatives: in 1982, Reagan issued a televised appeal for Congress to fund the deployment of the MX, a powerful new type of missile; in late 1983, the US placed Pershing II and cruise missiles in West Germany, carrying out the controversial NATO Double-Track Decision (Hoffman 27-58; Rhodes).
- [3]In September 1983, Soviet forces shot down the civilian airliner KAL 007, killing 269 passengers, including sixty-one Americans. Two months later, a NATO exercise in Europe simulating a nuclear attack on the USSR was apparently perceived by the Soviets as the beginning of a real strike, so Moscow prepared to respond in kind.
- [4]The captions read as follows: ‘It took more than 300 years for Metropolis to grow from a few scattered Indian settlements of stitched hide-huts—to the sprawling glass and steel entity that stretches from one tip of the island to the other. Mere **moments** were required to reduce it to a state the Indians would not recognize...if there were any Indians left...if **anyone** was left’ (Kupperberg 3).
- [5]Superman’s inner monologue during this sequence: ‘the **woman**... on **television**... she said the bomb would detonate **harmlessly**... You cannot touch my planet without destroying something **precious**. Even her **deserts** are abundant.’ (Miller, ‘Falls’ 24)
- [6]There were a few precedents of war-themed parables set in Krypton’s past, although none as expansive as this one. The most similar one had been the 8-page backup ‘All in the Mind!’ (Wolfman).
- [7]In 1982, hundreds of thousands of people had marched in New York against nuclear arms, freeze initiatives had won referenda in nine states, and both the Senate and the House of Representatives had discussed freeze resolutions (Fitzgerald 179-81; Kleidman 135-82).
- [8]While convincing himself that he could preventively disarm nuclear weapons in secret, the Man of Steel saved a window cleaner’s life by fixing a cable about to break without the cleaner realizing it (Kupperberg 7). A confident Superman then sought to protect the underwater city of Tritonis by hastily closing nearby heated air-pockets in the Earth’s crust, only to find out he had inadvertently undermined an energy experiment, which made him indecisive about his judgement (7-10).
- [9]The screenplay was written by Lawrence Konner and Mark Rosenthal from a story co-plotted with Christopher Reeve.

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