Valerio Massimo De Angelis

Super-Pop Culture: With Great Power, A Greater Irresponsibility

One of the foremost examples of the globally dominant American pop culture is the (sub-)genre of superhero comic books, whose (super)power of influencing ideological attitudes and worldviews has been dramatically strengthened by their conquest of the Hollywood blockbuster industry. In general terms, popular culture is usually associated with a marked social and political irresponsibility, committed as it is (or should be) to elicit the most superficial forms of harmless pleasure. But since the very birth of the genre, superheroes have been deeply engaged in (not always deep) meditations about the motivations and consequences of their actions. This essay aims at briefly describing the variously deviating trajectories superheroes have taken through the decades in facing the moral and political implications of their predicaments, and at better defining the theme of their "(ir-)responsibility," as regards also the "super" powers of comic-book authors themselves, who are allowed by their extremely economic and easily accessible medium to create with the utmost freedom whole narrative and visual worlds.

Super-Powers, Super-Responsibilities

The official birthday of the superhero comic book is April 18, 1938, when the first number of the *Action Comics* magazine showcased the debut of a character created in 1932 by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster: Superman. A number of comic-book/strip heroes, led by Lee Falk's Mandrake (born in 1934) and The Phantom (1936), had already paved the way, showing powers far greater than the ones the average detective or adventurer could

resort to: "the term 'superhero' was used as early as 1917 to describe a public figure of great talents or accomplishments," even if "the early comic book heroes of the 1940s were usually referred to by their creators as 'costumed characters' or as 'long-under-wear' or 'union-suit heroes'" (Benton 5).[1] Termed as such or not, it is hardly a coincidence that superheroes first emerged in American popular culture in a decade that started with the Great Depression and ended with the explosion of the Second World War, two events that threatened to devastate not only the United States but the world as a whole. Superhero comic books had been "the perfect entertainment form for the Depression: their heroic, larger-than-life characters stirred the demoralized masses, and the very format of the magazines themselves – usually sixty-four pages of original material for a mere dime – was a bargain during those times of economic hardship" (Eury 230). They became even more so during the war, when superhero writers and illustrators actively enlisted their creations in the fight against Nazi-Fascism, and buying comic books was also a way to fund the war effort.[2] The result of the paradoxical conflation of the admittedly light-hearted attitude of this popular genre and the self-conscious dedication to the public good was that since the very beginning superhero comics were somehow forced to stage a sort of philosophical and political debate on what was the meaning of social responsibility and on how people invested with superior powers had to use them in order not to go beyond good and evil, but to staunchly uphold the former against the latter.

We all know Spider-Man's famous motto, pronounced by his uncle Ben, "with great power there must also come – great responsibility,"[3] but in an undelivered Jefferson Day Address, written on April 11, 1945, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had already stated something extremely similar: "great power involves great responsibility."[4] However, in the 1930s the logic of the motto had to be somehow reversed: faced with the prospect of economic and military Armageddons, the United States felt that its responsibility was to dramatically increase its power. The first superheroes answered to this call for action in ways that question the long-standing cliché of their being disinterested in the social and political fate of their nation and of the world. In his earliest adventures, Superman struggled against wife-batterers and labor-exploiters, as "a kind of super-social worker … a 'Champion of the Oppressed,'

reflecting the liberal idealism of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal" (Sabin 61)[5] – an engagement that during the Cold War years developed into the more conservative celebration of "Truth, Justice, and the American Way": "our socialist, utopian, humanist hero was slowly transformed into a marketing tool, a patriotic stooge, and, worse: the betrayer of his own creators" (Morrison 16). This "normalized" Superman has been seen by Umberto Eco as a paladin of the establishment not only because he plainly endorses its values, but above all because the plot of most of his adventures, based on the repetition of the same situations, creates a sort of "immobilizing metaphysics" that confirms at the level of narrative structure the fundamental aporia in Superman's vision of the world: "in Superman we have a perfect example of civic consciousness, completely split from political consciousness" (Eco 22) – an irresponsible responsibility, we could say.

Panel from *Superman*'s first issue (1939)

The much darker character of Batman (who does not actually have super-powers, but may avail himself of a wide array of technological devices due to his wealth – his real "super-power") displayed features not unlike those of hard-boiled detectives, but his motivations were not bluntly professional as in Hammett's Continental Op or Sam Spade – they came from the drive to put things back in the right order, as a reaction to the primal

trauma of having witnessed, when still a child, the murder of his parents (and Batman's first antagonists were ordinary delinquents, often members of organized crime). As for Captain America, his enlistment in the war graphically represented the United States' taking on their responsibility in the world power struggle, as is shown in the cover of the very first issue, where we can see the Sentinel of Liberty punching Adolf Hitler.

Captain America, first issue (1941)

One way or the other, in the years that saw the birth of the (by far) broadest fictional worlds of Western culture (it is virtually impossible to calculate the sheer number of pages forming, through more than seven decades, the narrative continuity of DC or Timely/Marvel Comics), the most blatant icons of pop culture were not marked out by the extravagant and laughing carelessness we usually apply to the idea of "pop" – quite the contrary: they were deadly serious, and perfectly aware of their role in American society, in cultural, political, and even educational terms. It was probably this obsession for "social responsibility" that caused the superhero comic books to fade away in the 1950s, overshadowed as they became by the much more fascinating and much less respectable horror comics published by EC Comics. The popular success of these comic books, ridden with "amoral" graphic violence, greatly worried the guardians of public decency, and in 1954 a book by an eminent psychiatrist, Fredric Wertham, denounced the perverting influence this kind of para-literature had on the emotional development of children.[6] Advertised as "the most shocking book of the year," *Seduction of the Innocent* was also

preoccupied for the authoritarian drift superhero comics might engender, "the superhuman philosophy, an offshoot of Nietzsche's superman who said, 'When you go to women, don't forget the whip'…. How did Nietzsche get into the nursery?" (Wertham 15). In his well-meaning crusade against the fascist tendencies he detected in comic books, Wertham seemed to ignore that Superman was invented by two authors who were the least likely to be allured by the Nazi misreading of Nietzsche – Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, both second-generation Jewish immigrants, who conflated the Hebrew myth of the Golem[7] (see Lund 2012) with a number of classical and Nordic myths about heroes devoting their lives to the selfless protection, and not the domination, of their communities. The book led the U.S. Senate to request a series of hearings with Wertham and triggered a joint defensive response by the publishers with the establishment of the "infamous" Comics Code Authority, which banned sex, violence, and challenges to authority. Superhero comics became even more "responsible," in the sense that they renounced to address any even remotely "adult" theme, and with a bizarre somersault devolved into a childlike and harmless irresponsibility, an unsubstantially frivolous "pop" attitude devoid of all kinds of appeal for non-infantile audiences until Timely Comics changed its name into Marvel Comics and, launching a new generation of "superheroes with superproblems," revamped the genre.

A more or less direct reflection of a deep and widespread anxiety in American society, under pressure from both the outside and the inside, these super-problematized heroes dominated the so-called Silver Age of comic books, whose beginning is conventionally located either in 1956, the year of the re-launching of the DC character The Flash and of the Soviet invasion of Hungary, or 1963, the year of the birth of Marvel Comics and of the death of J.F.K., and its ending in the early '70s, when America was living through the worst phase of the Vietnam syndrome and superhero comics lost their "innocence" with the accidental killing of Gwen Stacy by her boyfriend, Spider-Man. Almost as if being the iconic representatives of a commercial and popular culture that was successfully colonizing the world by demolishing local differences, but generating in the process various forms of hostile resistance, also involved a hidden sense of guilt and of inadequacy, superheroes were driven by a compulsory desire to do the right thing that often resulted in the misinterpretation of their actions by

the "ordinary" people they desperately tried to protect and serve. Even the most openly pro-establishment superhero, Iron Man, the armored alter ego of a playboy billionaire creator of all sorts of weapons for the government (thus conflating the industrial and military complex in one single fascinating icon), whose main enemies were Communist spies, scientists and technologically enhanced soldiers, was affected by disquieting doubts about his own identity and responsibilities, not dissimilar from those haunting many Manhattan Project nuclear scientists, that would eventually lead him to become an alcoholic. On the other side of the ideological spectrum, the X-Men, a group of teenage mutants who discovered their exceptional abilities at the threshold of puberty only to come to a brutal clash with the wall of discrimination and exclusion "normals" have built in order to preserve their idea of a "pure" America, clearly alluded to the tensions and disillusions of the emancipatory process fused by the Civil Rights movement, and carried on by the rising youth counterculture. Mutants literally embodied the strains of a society which replicated the closure against the external "alien" (the Communist threat) in the staggering defensive stance towards the *inside* mutations that were transforming the ethnic, social, and cultural landscape of America. Their changing bodies were "explicitly traumatic, armored against the world outside yet racked and torn apart by complex forces within"; the mutant body *was* the body of America, "oxymoronic" because "rigidly protected but dangerously unstable" (Bukatman 51).

The Contradictions of Responsibility

An inner contradictoriness and a self-referential preoccupation with their social and cultural function seem thus to be two main features of superhero comic books. The latter is also mirrored in the civil identity of the two most representative characters of DC and Marvel Comics, Superman and Spider-Man, who both work in the media industry, one as a reporter and the other as a free-lance photographer, and are therefore ensnared in a complex subject-object relationship in which they alternatively play the two roles. As subjects in the process of reproduction and commodification of reality, they are constantly aware that the way they represent events

deeply influences the perception and interpretation the audience will have of them as (super-)active agents in the public sphere, that they have the power not only to "do" things but also to make them seen in (what they think is) the "right" light; on the other hand, their predicament entails that they hide the single most important aspect that would allow the audience to reach a fuller understanding of why and how they do what they do as superheroes – their private identities.

Apparently, Superman's alter ego, Clark Kent, "serves as a traditional intellectual" (Williams 134), fully engaged in the endorsement of the American Dream: the superhero and the journalist seem to share the same uncritical adhesion to the values of dominant liberal ideology. But Superman has a *third* identity – Kal-El, the last survivor of a vanished alien race. In many narrative sequences Superman/Kal-El is faced with the dilemma of choosing between his adopted country/world and his ancestral home, and even if he almost always sticks to the former, the tension is never fully solved, and remains as a source of anxiety for this sort of super-immigrant who is constantly under scrutiny, in search of signs of a subversive anti-American/anti-human attitude by the same media he works for. In order to dispel these doubts, he must look even more American than the Americans themselves, but the fact that the only place he feels really "at home" is the Arctic Fortress of Solitude is an ominous commentary on his supposedly successful integration in our world and hints at a sort of psychotic, almost autistic reaction against the pressures of social super-responsibility.

For Peter Parker, the man behind Spider-Man's mask, things are even more contradictory. Parker works (or at least he did until some years ago) for a newspaper, *The Daily Bugle*, whose publisher and editor-in-chief, J. Jonah Jameson, is obsessively engaged in a crusade against masked vigilantes, and the implications of acting on the two poles of the process of signification, as codifiers of the message and as signs the message codifies, stress the two-way interconnection between the hero's use of his powers and the powers that the media, and the dominant ideology they broadcast, exert upon him. This interplay between the subjective "truth" of the hero and the process of objective reification that he is a (conscious and active) victim of metafictionally mirrors the quandary of superhero comics in the context of commercial/popular culture: for all the unpleasant symptoms of

the unsolved traumas hidden in American society they may show, they are invariably regarded, by the same media system they belong to, as harmless forms of irresponsible entertainment, or even indicted by counterculture of being nothing more than "fake and goofy emanations of established authority, expressions of the American government's will to power, and fundamentally enemies of freedom" (Barbieri 45) (my translation). Or this may only be the way the communication media system misrepresents the ideological outlook (at least many) superhero comics really have and their readers' (much less simplistic) perception and interpretation of them.

Superheroes and the War on Terror

Almost inevitably, in the recent past the issue of superheroes' responsibility came prominently to the fore during the global war on terrorism launched by the George W. Bush's administration after the 9/11 attacks, when the super-champion singled out to represent America's acceptance of its burden as the defender of world democracy was Captain America, who in 2005 was even invited to the Pentagon by Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld, together with Spider-Man, to sponsor the America Supports You initiative.

Captain America and Spider-Man at the Pentagon
with Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld, 2005.

The pictures of the event show two clumsy impersonators who unsuccessfully try to look martially heroic, but what most awkwardly reveals the mixed feelings the world of superheroes had in responding to this call to arms are the words Marvel Comics senior vice president Rob Steffens said in

that occasion: "I work for Marvel Enterprises – I have the privilege of doing something frivolous for a living.… At Marvel, we create comic books and movies and intellectual properties to entertain people. I'm thankful to live in a country where we have the freedom to produce something frivolous as a means of entertainment" (qtd. in Lawrence 3). The twice-repeated trope of frivolity in a context of maximum seriousness might simply seem a self-denunciating confession of inadequacy, but it is also an attempt to disengage the most patriotic of American superheroes from the risk of being entrapped in a narrative universe, that of "real life," where the high-sounding rhetoric of world domination disguised as exportation of democracy used by Bush Jr., Cheney, and Rumsfeld echoes not the way fictional superheroes think and talk about their predicament, but that of their arch-enemies. More often than not, Captain America has showed a deep uneasiness in endorsing the official values of post-9/11 America, legitimized by a "representation of US global dominance" based "upon representations of a destabilized world order in need of US power to maintain order" (Pease 20).[8] Rather than simply re-establishing that alleged stable hierarchy, Captain America has been forced to become disquietingly aware of its fictionality, and the issue of the superhero's responsibility has been almost turned upside down, or better projected into a distorting looking glass. Even when the situation seems to call for direct attack against evil Muslim terrorists (the choice a Batman-like vigilante un-questioningly makes in the almost self-parodistic 2011 *Holy Terror* graphic novel by Frank Miller, who in a comic-book convention curtly defined it as "a piece of propaganda"), Captain America's mission implies the recognition of the extent to which his enemies are the product of precise political choices by the United States, and that even the supreme instance of "inhuman" aggression against his own country is almost a reverse reenactment of something America itself did in the past on a much wider scale. In the *Enemy* story arc (June-December 2002), Captain America's search for a terrorist leads him to Dresden, where he compares the destruction of the city by the Allies' incendiary bombs during World War II to what happened on September 11: "You didn't understand what we'd done here … until September the Eleventh. Before then … you would have said that we were doing what we had to.… But now …" (*Captain America* 4:5, Oct. 2002). Captain America's mirror-like retrospective glance overturns the ideological justifications of the war on

terror and destabilizes even the myth that gave birth to his own identity as a superhero, that of a Second World War that was rightly fought using any means necessary, from the weapons of mass destruction to the experiments for the creation of a super-soldier (and in the *Truth: Red White and Black* miniseries, published in 2002-2003, we discover that the Captain America serum was first tested on unsuspecting African Americans).

Often described as the perfect embodiment of the "superhero American monomyth," a lonely "Everyman" with a "democratic face" who redeems his otherwise helpless community but whose status as an "un-elected, law-transcending" *Übermensch* conceals a "pop-fascist dimension" (Jewett, Lawrence 29), Captain America should be read instead as the ever-changing symbol of the inherent contradictions of America's national self, torn between fantasies of almost divine empowerment and the fear for the crumbling away of democratic principles – an inextricable knot that in the 1973-74 *Secret Empire* storyline Captain America was unable to unravel, after discovering that the leader of the evil fascist organization was the U.S. President (Richard Nixon, at the time of the Watergate scandal), forced to finally commit suicide. The decision to give up his shield and armor (immediately entrusted by the government to a redneck reactionary), and take for some time the on-the-road anonymous identity of the disillusioned "Nomad, the Man Without a Country," set Steve Rogers on a quest for a personal as well as national identity that was regained at the end, of course, but this cycle will obsessively repeat itself throughout Cap's subsequent career.

Anarchy and Authority

The ambiguous configuration of the issue of responsibility in superhero comic books and the self-deconstructing consequences it may have, led, some years ago, to the gradual narrative disintegration of the WildStorm Universe, one of the most innovative superhero worlds. Originally established in 1992 by writer and illustrator Jim Lee as a branch of the independent publishing company Image, at the beginning WildStorm mostly replicated commonplace clichés, but when in 1999 it became an editorially separate imprint of DC Comics, instead of complying even more with

the rules of mainstream superhero comics it took a deeply revisionary, if not revolutionary, turn. Series such as Warren Ellis's *The Authority*, about a group of left-wing superheroes who break free from the supervision of every state or international institution and take over the responsibility of "really changing things" as regards the hierarchical structure of world power, tackled with one of the most frequent questions about the limits of superhero narrative universes – that is, given the amount of powers these superheroes can avail themselves of, why do they not use them in order to establish peace and social equality instead of simply fighting implausible supervillains?[9] In 2004 the narrative arc *Coup d'État* gave the most extreme answer to the question: the Authority take control of the American government, but are contrasted by underground human and superhuman groups fighting against what they see as a degeneration towards a Fascist-like dictatorship. The overturning of the superheroes' usual obedience to established authority results in the capsizing of anarchic impulses, converted into sheer will to power, while the former defenders of the status quo become fighters for freedom and independence. In 2008 a further turn of the screw was given by the crossover sequence *Revelations – Armageddon – Number of the Beast*, that revealed how after the Second World War the U.S. government, allied with an alien who crash-landed in Area 52, captured all the superheroes and supervillains who fought during the war and put them in a state of suspended animation intended to create an army of passive weapons of mass destruction. When the Authority manages to free the superhumans, the clones of the most powerful of them, secretly counter-programmed by the alien conspirator, explode in the sky, projecting an energy wave that tilts the Earth's axis and turns the planet into the post-apocalyptic wasteland described by WildStorm's swan song, the story arc *World's End*. Established authorities and subversive counter-hegemonic (anti-)heroes thus collaborate in precipitating the world towards self-destruction, each mirroring the other in their frenzied obsession with power *per se*, and the ambition to take full responsibility in guiding the fate of the human race deteriorates into a twisted, masochistic irresponsibility. In his fascinating mix of autobiographical memoir and critical analysis of the superhero genre, *Supergods*, Grant Morrison poignantly underlines the inherent contradiction that finally deconstructs this attempt to redefine in

an anti-establishment, revolutionary perspective the identity of the super-hero: "it was a particular kind of power fantasy: that of impotent liberals, who feared deep down that it was really only force and violence and not patient diplomacy that got things done, and that only soldiers and very rich people had the world figured out…. These books were a capitulation to a kind of thinking that would come to dominate … the new millennium" (Morrison 320) – or, using Matthew J. Costello's words, the outcome of an oxymoronic "Liberalism with a Fascist Aesthetic" (215).[10]

Super-Civil Wars

Instead of staging a radical opposition to the status quo, the *Civil War* narrative arc Marvel Comics published in 2006-2007 went somehow even deeper in undercutting any easy identification of superheroes with the avatars of established authority, since it did not deal with some conflict against an outside enemy, but with the implosion of the bonds of solidarity in the superhuman community. After the New Warriors, a group of young superheroes looking for media exposure who have accepted to become the protagonists of a TV reality show, irresponsibly try to apprehend a group of supercriminals without thinking about the possible outcome of their action, which results in the death of 600 civilians, public opinion calls for some kind of regulation for enhanced humans, and one of their leaders, Tony Stark/Iron Man, publicly declares his support to the proposal of an Act of Registration, which compels superheroes to reveal their secret identities and accept to become official law enforcers (or even military personnel). Against all odds, Captain America takes a firm, Thoreau-like stand against the registration; his act of civil disobedience, "in the tradition of peaceful protest in America," is for him not a dismissal of the American Dream, but a deeper honoring of "its laws by taking responsibility for his opposition" (Garrett 54) to what he sees as the establishment of an authoritarian police state. When the government builds a secret detention facility in another dimension where dissenting superhumans are detained without any public trial or any concern as to their civil rights, the analogies with the degenerations of the war on terrorism are made as clear as they can

be,[11] with the difference that this super-Guantanamo does not host foreign suspect terrorists, but the defenders of the American Way. This triggers a short circuit that comes full circle when Captain America, on the point of vanquishing Iron Man, suddenly decides to surrender to the government, and is (only apparently, we will much later discover) shot dead by a sniper while being brought to jail – a sort of ritual killing of the (super-)scapegoat hero embodying all the values America has decided to give up.

Super-Authors

Superhero comic books and movies might well be projections of fantasies of power by and for those who are actually powerless, and who by indulging in them tend to take a passive stance toward a possible active transformation of the existing state of things. If this is the "real" cultural work of the genre, instead of dismissing such fantasies as pathetically ineffectual the reader might take the opposite route, and by "irresponsibly" traversing them identify with such ambiguous figures of (super)authority, distorted versions of the Lacanian *nom du pére* (the name of the father, the symbolic equivalent of order and law), and thus come to acknowledge his or her hidden drives to destructive and self-destructive ultimate power.

But the readers' possibility of indulging in "immature" and irresponsible fantasies of absolute power is also a reflection of the authors' own dual relationship with the power they are *really* interested in – cultural power. On the one hand, working in the comic industry has always been seen by the mainstream cultural system, at least until very recently, as a second-rate profession, granting only a limited authority and respectability to its practitioners, and situating them in an ancillary position in relation to literary writers and visual artists, the real "heroes" of culture, with comic-book authors playing the role of losers in the competition. As a matter of fact, as Fiorenzo Iuliano has written about recent graphic novels featuring ordinary people beaten by life, "losers and comics heroes form a dyad that outlives actual comic artists, confirming that the mythical qualities traditionally projected on superheroes (strength, courage, audacity) do not exist and never existed but as losers' idealizations" (Iuliano n.p.).

On the other hand, the specific formal characteristics of the medium also greatly enhance the expressive possibilities of both word and image by synergistically conflating them in a hybrid narrative-pictorial form, as the most famous and influential of all writers-illustrators, Will Eisner, demonstrated in his seminal *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985). "Sequential art" affords creators an almost total control on the product of their imagination, and when applied to superhero fictional worlds this equates to a sort of exhilarating omnipotence, which cannot be contained by any unbreakable rule of verisimilitude or narrative cohesion. Marginalized in the outer borderlands of "art," marked with the negative moral label of being too prone to compromises with the commercial exigencies of the marketplace, superhero comic-book storytellers and pencilers take their vengeance by reveling in the shameless exploitation of the enormous, divine-like powers the genre bestows to them, repeatedly killing and resuscitating the same character, or building up and annihilating entire orders of reality in a few pages. Ostracized by highbrow culture, superhero comic books retort with the most lighthearted decontextualization and incorporation of stylistic features, mythological patterns, and thematic clusters stolen from the major literary and artistic products of ancient civilization (see Arnaudo), the Middle Ages or the Renaissance (see Tondro), as well as from all kinds of religious cultures (see Brewer, Garrett, Oropeza). They even venture to massively entertain a metaphysical search for truth, or better for the postmodern awareness of its relativity if not non-existence, not only contributing as they do "to perpetuate the instability of the bond between sign and referent which is typical of the postmodern universe" (Simonetti 34) (trans. mine), but also providing "bold metaphors for discussing ideas or reifying abstractions into narrative fiction. They're the closest thing that exists right now to the 'novel of ideas'" (Wolk 92).[12]

Besides, heavily relying as it does on stylized visual communication, graphic storytelling "speaks in a language that is accessible to a wide audience, transcending many of the national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries imposed by other media and giving it a reach that is as democratic as it is immediate" (Royal x).[13] If this opens up an immense transnational horizon of readership to an eminently American pop-cultural form of expression, the reverse is also true, in the sense that superhero icons have

been vastly appropriated and adjusted by other national and local cultures, and that these cultures have themselves been able to infiltrate the genre, altering both its formal outlook and its ideological substratum, sometimes re-orienting it in a radically counter-hegemonic direction (we now even have multi-ethnic Islamic superheroes, DC's *The 99*).

The enormous pop-cultural (super-)power of superhero comics is therefore a blade cutting both ways: it may be instrumental to disseminate world-wide America's own representation of itself as a necessary and responsible global authority, but its extreme flexibility as a transnational visual/literary form[14] provides an entrance for decentered perspectives that compel readers to take an almost anamorphic look at the global pop culture we all belong to, allowing them to detect its fissures, the cracks in the pattern, the symptoms of what should be hidden and censored but instead resoundingly explode in the apparently innocuous multicolored pages of comic books.

Notes

[1] Superhero comic books were an offspring of pulp comic books (for a general overview of their genesis, see Jones): "In January 1929, pulp fiction met the comics when the pulp heroes Tarzan and Buck Rogers debuted as newspaper comic strips" (Wright 3).

[2] During World War II, comics were not only a big business in commercial entertainment ("in the war period comic-book sales were ten times those recorded by the overall distribution of the three main periodicals of the time, *Life*, *Reader's Digest* and *Saturday Evening Post*" [Simonetti 35] [trans. mine]); they were also "one of the most regular contacts" overseas servicemen "had with America" (Gordon 70-71). This adds much to their creators' awareness of the social and cultural responsibility they had.

[3] The first instance of this phrase actually appears as a caption in *Amazing Fantasy* 15 (August 1962), the issue where Spider-Man made his appearance. In a number of subsequent retellings of the episode, the phrase (often simplified as "With great powers, comes great responsibility") is directly told by Uncle Ben.

[4] The concept was probably first expressed in more or less the same way by Voltaire (but see also Luke 12:48: "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required").

[5] Ben Saunders goes even further in characterizing "the good that Superman does" at the beginning of his career "as a form of sociopolitical intervention…. 'Justice,' for Siegel and Shuster's original Superman, is less a matter of individual rights than a matter of the distribution of wealth…. Superman not only asserts the primacy of a moral economy over and above that of the market economy, but he does so without regard for the laws of his

society protecting the sanctity of property" (Saunders 22).

6   The founder of the Marvel Universe, Stan Lee, somehow shared Wertham's opinion that comics had an enormous impact on the younger generations when he stated: "The more I realized how influential our books were, the more I tried to get some little moral lessons in the stories" (qtd. in Thomas 105). On the anti-comics crusade of the 1950s, see Hajdu.

7   The foremost Nazi ideologue, Joseph Goebbels, was perfectly aware of this. In the April 25, 1940, issue of the S.S. weekly paper, *Das Schwarze Korps*, he clearly showed his preoccupation for Superman's – not physical, but ideological – (super-)powers in the way he insulted Jerry Siegel as the "intellectually and physically circumcised chap who has his headquarters in New York," and "is the inventor of a colorful figure … with an overdeveloped body and underdeveloped mind" (qtd. in Brod 75). On how Jewish comic-book authors managed to create a mythology of power opposite to that of the Nazi *Übermensch*, see also Fingeroth 2007.

8   On the complex response of superhero comics to post-9/11 world (dis)order, see the fourth section of Lund 2012, especially the essays by A. David Lewis and Jeff Geers.

9   The basic aporia of the superhero genre – why are god-like superheroes unable to build a utopia – has also been analyzed from a Foucaultian perspective as the manifestation of the inner limits not so much of the heroes themselves but of the dominant ideology they should embody (see Wolf-Meyer).

10   Marc DiPaolo argues that *The Ultimates*, one of the Marvel series set in the Ultimate alternative narrative universe, are a perfect example of such an ambiguous ideological/aesthetic contradiction, since this government task force "talked breezily about pop culture, employed ruthless, Jack Bauer-style tactics in fighting their enemies, and trash-talked France," and even if in their private lives they prove to have violently paranoid tendencies, everything seems to be excused by their embodying a superior, more than human authority, glorified by the way they are visually represented: "These superheroes were not acting like heroes, but the art made them appear to be gods" (DiPaolo 33).

11   Sources at Marvel Comics told CNN that *Civil War* "was intentionally written as an allegory to current real-life issues like the Patriot Act, the War on Terror, and the September 11 attacks" (qtd. in Hayton, Albright 21).

12   On how superhero comics address metaphysical and philosophical issues, a number of books by Wiley-Blackwell have been published in recent years. See Dryden & White; Housel & Wisnewski; Sanford; White 2009, 2010, 2012 & 2013; White & Arp. The genre has even been used as a tool for psychotherapy (see Rubin).

13   In his famous comic-book study of comic books, *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud remarks how the process of "cartooning" actually abstracts images not by "eliminating details" but on "focusing on specific details" that amplify the shared meaning of the images, making them virtually accessible to everyone (McCloud 31).

14   For a reading of comic books in a transnational perspective, see Denson, Meyer & Stein 2013.

Works cited

Arnaudo, Marco. *The Myth of the Superhero*. Trans. Jamie Richards. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2013.

Benton, Mike. *Superhero Comics of the Golden Age: The Illustrated History*. Dallas: Taylor, 1992.

Brewer, H. Michael. *Who Needs a Superhero?: Finding Virtue, Vice and What's Holy in the Comics*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004.

Brod, Harry. *Superman Is Jewish?: How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way*. New York: The Free P, 2012.

Barbieri, Daniele. *Breve storia della letteratura a fumetti*. Rome: Carocci, 2009.

Bukatman, Scott. *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003.

Costello, Matthew J. *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books & the Unmasking of Cold War America*. New York: Continuum, 2009.

Denson, Shane, Christina Meyer, and Daniel Stein, eds. *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

DiPaolo, Marc. *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2013.

Dryden, Jane, and Mark D. White, eds. *Green Lantern and Philosophy: No Evil Shall Escape This Book*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Eco, Umberto. "The Myth of Superman." Trans. Natalie Chilton. *Diacritics* 2 (1972): 14-22

Eisner, Will: C*omics and Sequential Art*. Tamarac: Poorhouse, 1985.

Eury, Michael. "Golden Age of Superheroes (1938-1954)." *The Superhero Book: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Comic-book Icons and Hollywood Heroes*. Ed. Gina Misiroglu and David A. Roach. Detroit: Visible Ink, 2004. 228-33.

Fingeroth, Danny. *Disguised As Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero*. New York: Continuum, 2007.

Garrett, Greg. *Holy Superheroes! Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Film*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008.

Geers, Jeff. "'The Great Machine Doesn't Wear a Cape!': American Cultural Anxiety and the Post-9/11 Superhero." Pustz 250-62.

Gordon, Ian. "Comic Books During World War II: Defending the American Way of Life." *Comic Books: Examining Pop Culture*. Ed. David Haugen. Farmington Hills: Greenhaven, 2005. 69-81.

Hajdu, David. *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How It Changed America*. New York: Picador, 2008.

Hayton, Christopher J., and David L. Albright. "O Captain, My Captain." Weiner 15-23.

Housel, Rebecca, and J. Jeremy Wisnewski, eds. *X-Men and Philosophy: Astonishing Insight and Uncanny Argument in the Mutant X-Verse*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Iuliano, Fiorenzo. "'I'm Not a Loser, I'm Just Drawn That Way:' Comix, Graphic Novels, and the Ethos of the Anti-Hero." *Iperstoria* 3 (2014) http://www.iperstoria.it/joomla/numeri/23-saggi/saggi-num-3/120-iuliano-comics>

Jewett, Robert, and John Shelton Lawrence. *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*. New York: Basic, 2004.

Lawrence, John Shelton. "Foreword." Weiner 1-7.

Lewis, A. David. "The Militarism of American Superheroes after 9/11." Pustz 223-36.

Lund, Martin. "American Golem: Reading America through Super-New Dealers and the 'Melting Pot.'" Pustz 79-93.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

Morrison, Grant. *What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human*. New York: Random House, 2012.

Oropeza, B.J., ed. *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005.

Pease, Donald. "Re-thinking 'American Studies after US Exceptionalism.'" *American Literary History* 21 (2009): 19-27.

Pustz, Matthew, ed. *Comic Books and American Cultural History: An Anthology.* New York: Continuum, 2012.

Royal, Derek Parker. "Foreword; or, Reading within the Gutter." *Approaches to Multicultural Comics: From Zap! to Blue Beetle*. Ed. Frederick Luis Aldama. Austin: U. of Texas P., 2009. ix-xi.

Rubin, Lawrence C., ed. *Using Superheroes in Counseling and Play Therapy*. New York: Springer, 2007.

Sabin, Roger. *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*. London: Phaidon, 1996.

Sanford, Jonathan, ed. *Spider-Man and Philosophy: The Web of Inquiry*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Saunders, Ben. *Do the Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality*, *Fantasy, and Superheroes*. New York: Continuum, 2011.

Simonetti, Paolo. "Supereroi postmoderni: Letteratura e *graphic novel* negli Stati Uniti." *Fictions* 9 (2010): 31-57.

Thomas, Roy. *Stan Lee's Amazing Marvel Universe*. New York: Sterling, 2006.

Tondro, Jason. *Superheroes of the Round Table: Comics Connections to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2011.

Weiner, Robert G., ed. *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2009.

Wertham, Fredric. *Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today's Youth*. New York: Rinehart, 1954.

White, Mark D., ed. *The Avengers and Philosophy: Earth's Mightiest Thinkers*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

—, ed. *Iron Man and Philosophy: Facing the Stark Reality*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

—, ed. *Superman and Philosophy: What Would the Man of Steel Do?* Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

—, ed. *Watchmen and Philosophy: A Rorschach Test*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

White, Mark D., and Robert Arp, eds. *Batman and Philosophy: The Dark Knight of the Soul*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.

Williams, Jeff. "Comics: A Tool of Subversion?" *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 2 (1994): 129-46.

Wolf-Meyer, Matthew. "The World Ozymandias Made: Utopias in the Superhero Comic, Subculture, and the Conservation of Difference." *Journal of Popular Culture* 36 (2003): 497–517.

Wolk, Douglas. *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*. New York: Da Capo P, 2007.

Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2003.