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Christian Wessely / Alexander D. Ornella (eds.)

# Drawn Stories, Moving Images
## Comic Books and their Screen Adaptations

SCHÜREN

# **J**RFM

## JOURNAL FOR RELIGION, FILM AND MEDIA

**J**RFM is a peer-reviewed, open-access, online publication. It offers a platform for scholarly research in the broad field of religion and media, with a particular interest in audiovisual and interactive forms of communication. It engages with the challenges arising from the dynamic development of media technologies and their interaction with religion.

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Alexander D. Ornella/Christian Wessely

# Editorial



Fig. 1: The truth about comics still needs to be uncovered. Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, New York: Harper Perennial, 1994 (1993), 211.

"The *truth* about comics can't stay hidden from view *forever*", argues Scott McCloud in his comic book about comic books.[1] In a way, this short quotation expresses the rich, ambivalent, and fascinating history of the medium that is the comic book. The comic book has been polarising opinions for more than 120 years: some have considered it a threat to the intellectual development of the younger generation, as venomous for the reigning moral standards in society, as cheap – and morally dubious – entertainment, as escapism, or as the reason for the demise of language. Others have praised the comic book for its creativity, for its ability to put children in touch with the pleasure of reading, or for its contemporary and innovative expression. The comic book has also been a popular medium for political, ethical and economic manipulation.[2]

The comic transcends the merely entertaining, and fans of comics become engaged and invested in the field through a range of activities. Major cities host regular comic conventions, attracting hundreds of thousands of attendees each year, who search for special issues of their favourite comic book series, meet artists, attend workshops and buy merchandise.[3] Many fans do not stop at just attending conventions; they do so dressed as their favourite comic characters

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1    McCloud 1994, 211.
2    See the article by Christian Wessely in this issue, 17–44.
3    See, for example, the MCM comic con in London (http://www.mcmcomiccon.com/london/ [accessed 11.4.2017]), the New York Comic Con (http://www.newyorkcomiccon.com/ [11.4.2017]), and the Vienna Comix (https://viennacomix.at/ [accessed 11.4.2017]).

or wearing badges, buttons, T-shirts or sweaters with images of those characters on them. In other words: many fans do not merely consume comic books; rather, they arrange a considerable part of their lives around them and in some cases even embody their heroes, that is, they copy their behaviour and their language.[4] The comic universe, the comic books and the range of activities emerging out of them and around them become a *meaningful* universe for fans.

As a site that can give rise to meaning, comics are not a religion-free zone. Religion emerges in and from comics in a variety of ways. Many comic book stories draw on the vast pool of narratives and imagery from religious and mythological traditions. The endless fight of good versus evil, the quest for purity and truth, the development of the virtues of the main characters, the initiation rites these characters have to go through – all these various elements connect the heroes and their narratives to a longing for that which transcends the ordinary,[5] a human longing of which Sallust said, "Now these things never happened, but always are."[6] Today, we can also find explicitly religious content being mediated through comic books, and Davide Zordan has argued that the medium "comic" is particularly apt to communicate religious narratives: "Now, even if comics is a popular medium considered mainly as a type of entertainment and, until very recently, without any societal relevance, it is characterised by this formal predisposition for religious subjects."[7]
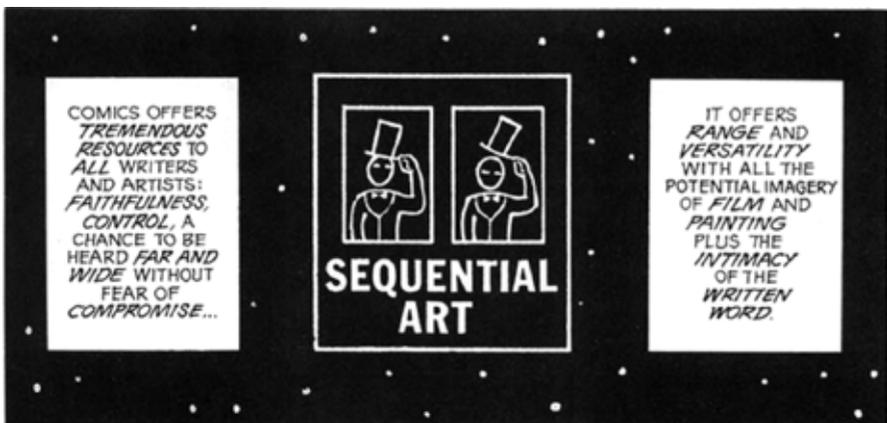


Fig. 2: A small part of the specific abilities of comics. Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, New York: Harper Perennial, 1994 (1993), 211.

4    It is fascinating to see this behaviour used as a cross-media-reference: in the popular sitcom The Big Bang Theory (Chuck Lorre, USA 2007–), the main characters share a fascination for comics and consequently spend considerable time in comic shops, at comic cons and talking about their favourite characters and series.
5    Chidester 2005, 1.
6    Salustios, On Gods and the Cosmos 4, in: Murray 1943, App. 205.
7    Zordan 2015, 150.

In recent years, turning comic books into movies and television shows has become a popular and financially lucrative endeavour. The cinematic adaptation of a written text is a complicated task and more interpretation than simply the transfer of content from one medium to another. The screenplay writer has to choose which parts of the storyline to pick and which to leave out, acting as both interpreter and censor.[8] The artists drawing the storyboard are limited in their freedom to sketch the pictures because they have to cater to the pictorial literacy of the viewers and their cultural context. Compared to the adaptation of just-text, the adaptation of a comic book appears much simpler because it provides the artists involved in the adaptation process not just with the (written) narrative but also with rich visual resources. But, in fact, a comic book adaptation is even more complicated. The visual universe of the comic offers only so much help, because the drawn image and the animated image are quite different. A character that is very popular in a comic book may lose much of its appeal when translated into an animated character. Some of the challenges of this translation have to do with the expectations and the imagination of the audience. They may already have formed a mental image of an animated character, with their ideas of how a drawn character walks, moves, behaves and interacts with other characters. The animation provided by the studio might then be at odds with the audience's imagination or expectations.

Sound, too, is challenging to translate from a comic book into an animated movie. Some comic book fans can be quite disappointed when they hear the animated version of their favourite comic books for the first time and when they hear how their familiar characters sound. In a comic book, the "audio track" is represented by visual means such as speech bubbles or written sound (e.g. "CRASH!", "ZIP!" or "GULP!"), again leaving room for the individual imagination. Last but not least, the comic book – even though on average it consists of only 40–70 pages – contains far more material than can possibly fit into a feature film–length work. Further, a comic book contains not only what is visible but also what is invisible. Scott McCloud emphasizes the importance of the space between the panels, where the mind of the reader (re)constructs considerable parts of the story that are only insinuated by the authors. As such, comics encourage a high level of audience engagement and involvement, and the audience becomes co-creator and co-writer of the story. It is then challenging to translate and transfer both the space-in-between and the level of audience engagement from comic books into movie adaptions.

Adapting a comic book into a live-action movie, rather than an animated movie, can be highly controversial. Some artists are sceptical about – or reject

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8    The length of a screenplay is roughly calculated with a one-page-per-film-minute formula, limiting it to 90–120 pages, whereas the underlying novel might consist of three or four times that number of pages.

outright – any adaptations of their works because they consider the characteristics of the medium a crucial part of the narrative and their narrative style.[9] Audience satisfaction and identification form a crucial issue, too. Live-action movies have to cater to a larger non-hardcore fan audience (or a dual audience of fans and non-fans).[10] Most importantly, however, the translation of the unique visual style of comics into photographic and live-action images poses a challenge: as Pascal Lefèvre has observed, "The different visual ontology may also be the reason why it is extremely difficult to adapt a strongly stylized or caricatured drawing into a photographic image."[11]

In short, comic books not only are part of cultural history but also have produced a vibrant material and visual culture. They participate in and contribute to socio-cultural discourses around, for example, ideas of masculinity, the value of art, adult versus youth entertainment and consumption, and identity negotiation. Most importantly, the comic universe is engaged in the production of meaning, the discussion of ethical questions and moral order, and questions of ultimate concern. This issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* addresses some of these topics.

In his introductory paper to the thematic section of this issue, Christian Wessely looks at the history of the comic from a European perspective as well as its unique characteristics as medium. In particular, he is interested in the genre's ability to manipulate, and he considers parallels in the development of the visual culture of the comic and the visual culture of interactive media. He argues that research should adapt the advanced tools and methodologies employed in the study of visual culture, in film studies and the study of comic books for example, to the study of interactive media such as Facebook, Instagram or WhatsApp. He suggests that these tools are particularly helpful in generating better understanding of leading forms of communication that rely on visual language and the compression of language.

The topic of violence is obviously important for comic book screen adaptations. Although brutal scenes are widely accepted in comic books, they are a problem in their respective movies. Theresia Heimerl analyses the role of (sexual) violence comparing Japanese movies (especially *anime*) and Hollywood productions. She shows that there exists a strong relationship between a positive or negative portrayal of the protagonists and the staging of their (hidden) sexual desires.

In his article entitled "The Problem of Evil in DC Universe Animated Movies", Toufic El-Khoury uses Leibniz's theodicy to critically analyse productions from

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9    Lefèvre 2007, 1.
10   Burke 2012.
11   Lefèvre 2007, 9.

the DC Multiverse in the period 2007 to 2016. He is particularly interested in moral questions, in how the DC Multiverse imagines evil and explains its existence, and in the DC Multiverse's possible answer to the problem of evil. He argues that the question of evil actually helped the comic universe to mature, but proposes that such growing-up also poses challenges for superheroes, both male and female: "These protagonists are stuck in an infinite vicious circle, where their heroic actions (fighting against the forces of evil) are incompatible with their identity (forces of evil define them as heroic protagonists)."

In his article "Shadows of the Bat", Simon Philipp Born looks at the question of good and evil in Tim Burton's and Christopher Nolan's Batman productions. Due to the popularity and sheer number of superhero movies that have been released since the beginning of this century, he calls the 21st century the "Golden Age of superhero movies". In his contribution, he is particularly interested in the worldview that is enacted in superhero movies. While on first sight it seems that these movies promote a dualistic or Manichaean worldview, Born argues that Burton's and Nolan's films "disclose and willingly subvert the clear-cut dichotomy in favor of a more complex and sophisticated viewpoint". As such, Born argues, Burton and Nolan uncover the socially constructed nature of "good" and "evil" that allows to exert control and power.

Thomas Hausmanninger approaches Captain America: The Winter Soldier[12] from a Judaistic perspective in his article "Deconstructing *gilgul*, Finding Identity". Hausmanninger applies a Judaic and Kabbalistic lens to his interpretation of this movie. He is particularly interested in the portrayal of the characters Captain America and Bucky. Hausmanninger argues that these two characters are "temporally displaced" and that this temporal displacement is more than a narrative tool, for he shows that the temporal displacement bears resemblance with the Judaic concept of *gilgul*, the transmigration of the soul. He argues that the concept of *gilgul* is crucial in portraying Captain America's identity negotiations and his quest "to become whole": "Captain America can only find his identity and become whole where he is able to name the reason for his existence in the present world."

The team around Ken Derry explores the complicated relationship between Netflix's 2016 series Luke Cage and religion in his paper "Bulletproof Love". Drawing on a rich range of disciplines, such as Black Theology, Hip Hop studies, gender studies, and the study of African American religion, Derry argues that the show Luke Cage (2016) "is both progressive and reactionary; emphasizes community and valorizes an individual; critiques and endorses Christianity; subverts and promotes violence". Derry argues that religion – or, better, theological thinking – is a key ingredient of the show: Luke Cage (2016) discusses things

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12    Captain America: The Winter Soldier (Anthony and Joe Russo, US 2014).

of ultimate concern. As such, the series can be seen as a piece of popular culture but also as a theological text.

The Open Section features an article by Michael Heim, the technophile philosopher and translator of Heidegger's works, on the renewed interest in virtual and augmented reality, for example, GoogleGlass, HoloLens, Sony PSVR, and Samsung Galaxy Gear. He is interested less in the technological aspects of augmented reality than in the anthropological questions the technology raises: What conditions and prerequisites ensure humans experience virtual and augmented reality as natural, familiar and inhabitable environments? In his article Heim argues that virtual and augmented realities can transcend the ordinary of the here and now and thus further develops his *Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*.[13]

Between 2010 and 2017, many comic book movie adaptations found their way to movie theatres and onto TV screens, with more to come.[14] Even as we write these lines, Disney/Marvel have announced 26 October 2017 as the U.S. release date for THOR: RAGNAROK (Taika Waititi, USA 2017).[15] Other announcements happen almost weekly, and the website www.sciencefiction.com, with a dedicated section to comic books, keeps track of some of these developments. The scene – and the business – is thriving, and research on comics, their movie adaptations and their religious motifs will provide a rich field of research for the disciplines of both theology and the science of religion over the coming years.

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13  Heim 1994.
14  E.g. THOR (Kenneth Brannagh, US 2011); DUCK TALES: THE MOVIE (Doug Walker, US 2011); ASTERIX AND OBELIX: GOD SAVE BRITANNIA (Laurent Tirard, FR 2012); X-MEN: APOCALYPSE (Bryan Singer, US 2016); BATMAN VS. SUPERMAN (Zack Snyder, US 2016).
15  See http://orf.at//stories/2387132/ about the trailer which is said to be record-breaking.

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Christian Wessely

# On the History and Hermeneutics of Comics

## ABSTRACT

What is a comic? The simple answer states that a comic is a drawn story that is pic-ture- rather than text-oriented and told serially. In other words, a comic is a type of illustration. Realism is not its goal; rather a narrative is developed through reduction according to specific stylistic means.

I start this article with a definition of the term "comic", and move on to highlight the complexity of the comic and to argue that insight into this complexity is neces-sary for its correct interpretation. Only then can we recognise that the comic is not only entertaining but also, in its own way, a vehicle for content that might be system confirming and propagandistic but can also be system critical. Doing so allows us to see the potential of the comic that is embedded in its particular affinity with nonlinear interactive audiovisual media.

## KEYWORDS

History of comics, hermeneutic of comics, illustrative language, dissident potential, propagandistic potential

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Master Craftsman Diploma and Engineer for Agriculture (HBLFA Raumberg-Gumpen-stein, 1984/1991); Mag. theol. (1991, distinction); Dr. theol. (Fundamental Theology; thesis on Mythological Structures in Entertainment Industry, Frankfurt: Lang 1995, distinction). Habilitation in Fundamental Theology (2004; thesis: *Gekommen, um zu dienen*, Regensburg: Pustet 2005). Director of the Institute for Fundamental Theology at the Karl-Franzens-University Graz, Austria, since 2014.

My principal area of expertise, Catholic fundamental theology, is not exactly known for its affinity with comics. Until the 1970s, comics were generally ig-nored by scholars; subsequently they were either vilified as an inferior genre or, worse, interpreted eisegetically. Only a small number of researchers took com-ics as seriously as they deserved,[1] and none of them worked from the specific perspective of fundamental theology. The discipline, however, cannot afford to

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1    A good example of an early, high quality approach is Wermke 1976.

disregard something that, on the one hand, uses religious symbols (Christian or not) to spread a certain message and, on the other hand, utilises narratives that are deeply rooted in religious thought, such as the apocalyptic struggle of good versus evil or the myth of a saviour. Nor should it be allowed to ignore comics, for one of the true tasks for fundamental theology is to see how a society communicates, and to analyse the religious context of this communication. In this article, I mix business with pleasure: a comic fan myself, I provide an overview of the history of the comic along with a hermeneutic take, and I end by looking to the topic's potential within a society that is dominated by interactive audio-visual media.

## DEFINITION PROBLEMS

What exactly is a comic? Intuitive definitions come readily, but a precise definition is more challenging for the range of genres – comical, criminological, pornographic, horror, for example – is so great. The Japanese *man-ga* means "funny picture", yet today the most widely read Mangas share hardly any comical elements. Just like Mangas, the comic more broadly has not been bound by the original meaning of the term used to describe it, and successful series like *Superman*[2] and *Mick Tangy*[3] or, more recently, *Deadpool*[4] and *Hellblazer*[5] (see fig. 1) are described as "comics" but have little to do with fun or humour.

The definition of the term "comic" contains a compromise frequently found in definitions, between exclusivity and restriction, on one hand, and inclusion and trivialisation, on the other.

Wiltrud Drechsel, Jörg Funhoff and Michael Hoffmann are amongst those who have pointed out that any formal definition of comics that ignores creation context and reception will be inadequate. Identification of the comic as "periodically published picture stories with fixed characters and speech bubbles with dialogues, where the picture dominates the word" leads us to "important elements of the medium," but as these authors acknowledge, this definition "fails to acknowledge the facts […] deliberately ignoring that comics can not be identified without their producers or purchasers."[6] The comic has *formal characteristics* as well as a *functional spectrum*, both of which are defined by production and reception.[7] We will return to this facet below.

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2   DC Comics, since 1938.
3   Published by the Dargaud Publishing House (also responsible for the Asterix series) from 1961 to 1973 and again since 2002.
4   Published by Marvel Comics, since 1991.
5   Published by DC Comics, since 1995.
6   Drechsel/Funhoff/Hoffmann 1975, 11.
7   Drechsel/Funhoff/Hoffmann 1975, for example, argues in the tradition of the capitalist-critical thinking of the movement of 1968. Such approaches banished the bald accusation that comics were an instru-

Fig. 1: Jamie Delano, *Hellblazer*, 153. Note the religious symbols used, such as the crosses, the window with the Saint George motive, and the gesture of adoration.

The historical perspective overreaches when it looks for the origins of comics in Egyptian wall paintings or the friezes of Trajan's Column, as has repeatedly been tried.[8] Admittedly, the image is older than the written word and was therefore the primary medium and agent of expression within prehistoric societies and societies where reading was reserved for a very small educated class.[9] And the picture remained the essential medium for the less educated members of a population, but was secondary for members of an increasingly literate society (as is well illustrated by the development and later decline of the *biblia pauperum*). In many ways, however, such pictures are not what we would understand today as typical of the comic.

Arguments about the history of the comic's essential Americanness[10] must also be challenged, for they are based on fallacy – the assumption that only "comic strips" (see below), which have appeared in the daily press since the 1890s, qualify as "comics". While such work was ground-breaking in publishing history, the "comic" genre is not only much older but also of European provenance. We need a more precise definition that emphasises the specific medial value of comics, for which formal and functional categories are essential.

## HISTORY

As demonstrated by fig. 2, a xylograph from a Dutch workshop, elements used to classify a comic (narration, abstraction, primacy of the image, and an extended field of vision; see in detail below) could be found in the art of 15th-century Europe. The *ars moriendi* illustration in fig. 2 depicts a dying man. Gathered at his bedside are Mary, mother of God, Jesus Christ, God the Father, and a group of saints, while four demon figures fight over the dying man's soul, with a fifth looking on from behind the bed. The pain of death can be read from the dying man's face. While folding their hands in prayer or raising their hands in blessing, the saints speak words of encouragement such as "Tu es firmus in fide!" (You are firm in faith!). But the demons are very active, too. They hold out three

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ment designed to dull their audience's minds, a suggestion that could still be heard in the 1980s. They deploy, however, a Marxist media theory and look at comics primarily as instruments of manipulation in favour of the status quo in the distribution of wealth and income. While the examples they used are out-dated, their argumentation should still be taken into account.

8    See e.g. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comic#Geschichte [accessed 6 Dec. 2016].

9    Between the black and white of literacy and illiteracy there are many shades of grey. In a culture that used scripture exclusively in a sacred context, reading competence was restricted to a very small group who had to have complete mastery of that skill (cf. Simek 2006, 100–102), but in the increasingly secular and economic context of later millennia the ability to read and write was acquired to support everyday life (cf. Haarmann 2002, especially the chapter "Ökonomische Funktionen des Schriftgebrauchs in Mesopotamien und Ägypten"). This phenomenon is also familiar in the 21st century, see https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/PISA-Studien#Entwicklung–der–Leistungen–2000.E2.80.932012 [accessed 10 Dec. 2016].

10   See e.g. Hollein in Braun/Hollein 2016, 7 or Gubern 1978, 63–65.
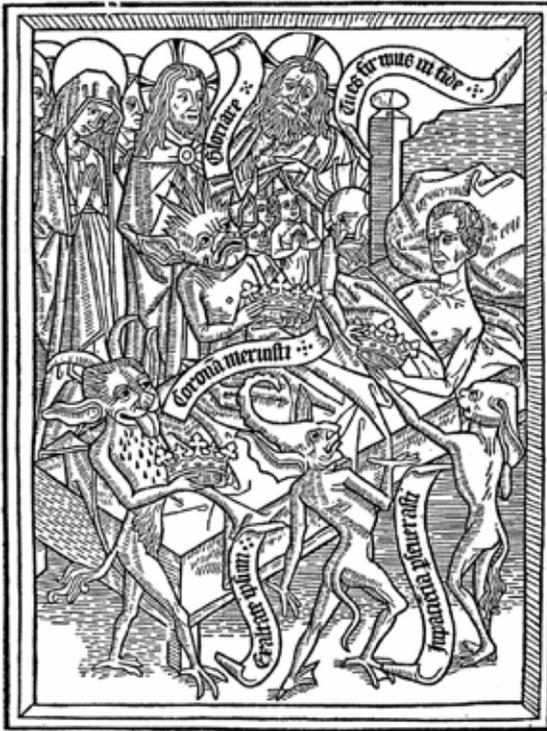
Fig. 2: Anonymous: *Ars moriendi*, c. 1460. Banners appear here as the forerunner of the later speech bubble.

crowns – symbols of earthly power and riches – towards the dying man, whom they seek to seduce with words of ambition and pride and to bring to commit a deadly sin ("Coronam meruisti!"; You deserve the crown!).

Such early forms of picture stories – designated here a "protocomic" – allowed the illiterate to access a story, as the accompanying text in fig. 3 explicitly notes: "Anyone who cannot read / need only watch the dance / to see how death always / has humans on his leash".[11]

The dawning of the comic is usually located in the late 19th century, with *The Yellow Kid* often cited as the first such example,[12] although the parallels with what is today understood as a comic are often only limited. The *Katzenjammer Kids* certainly seems closer to today's definition,[13] although its creator, exiled German cartoonist Rudolph Dirks, plagiarised Wilhelm Busch's *Max und Moritz* even to the extent of drawing on individual episodic details. Dirks enriched Busch's concept (though he was unable to replicate Busch's graphic brilliance)

11   "Wer doch nit lessen kan, / beschau den tantz nur an, / wie der tott all augenblickh / den menschen hat an seinem strickh."
12   Drawn by Richard Outcault, published in New York World from 1895.
13   Drawn by Rudolph Dirks, published in the New York Journal from 1897.

Fig. 3: *Dance of Death*, Bleibach, about 1720. © Jörgens.mi ⁄ CC-BY-SA-3.0 (via Wikimedia Commons). The banner says "Mein Trompetenschall bringt Freud oder Truebsal in Ewigkeit" (The sound of my trumpets brings joy or sadness for eternity).

with a strict seriality and the use of speech bubbles. Until the 1930s the "official" comic genre was still dominated by the humorous content that had been responsible for its name. In the mid 1920s, however, demand for pornographic comics thrived, in the U.S. market in particular, where cheaply produced booklets with eight to ten pages were sold under the collective name Tijuana Bibles.[14]

In 1929 Belgian George Remi, writing under the pen name Hergé, designed the series entitled *The Adventures of Tintin*,[15] a pioneering achievement in blending adventure story and comic elements. The same year saw the publication of Hal Foster's *Tarzan*, an adventure story full of suspense but with realistic depictions,[16] which launched a paradigm shift, with the move away from the comic genre towards the adventure and hero genre, a trend that continued with the detective comic *Dick Tracy* (1931) and reached a zenith with the eponymous superhero characters of *Superman* (1938) and *Batman* (1939), both published by DC Comics. The comical receded or was eliminated as the "comic" forsook its origins. The comic's format also changed, as the comic strips that had been the rule until the 1930s were supplemented by comic albums that might have sixteen or more pages.[17] The time was ripe for such innovation, for, as Drechsel/ Funhoff/Hoffmann have noted, such superheroes not only provided a means of

14   http://www.tijuanabible.org/.
15   By the time of his death in 1983, Hergé had created 24 volumes in the Tintin series; volume 25 lay unfinished on his desk.
16   Hal Foster's renown stemmed not only from Tarzan but also from Prince Valiant. Both series lack the speech bubble, an essential part of the comic. Foster's characters do talk, but the text is written as a side note to each panel and is sufficiently elaborate for the story to be gleaned from the text alone, without the aid of the pictures. Thus, Price Valiant and Tarzan are more illustrated stories than comics.
17   Due to the production process, the size of an album of issues corresponds to the size of the printsheets. A printsheet is usually cut into sixteen pages, and as the number of pages in a volume is usually calculated by half printsheets, such volumes usually contain eight pages.

fleeing the disaster of Black Friday but also acted as propaganda for the New Deal, with their message of upward mobility countering the very real fear of spiralling downward.[18]

The *comic strip* – illustrated connected images that appeared in the regular print media, limited to a certain page width and with a panel height of usually one eighth to one quarter of a page – did not disappear; instead, it has continued to thrive, and with its distinctive emphases remains a popular component of contemporary print.[19]

The *graphic novel* forms a subcategory of the comic. The term was coined by illustrator and author Will Eisner, who referred to his work *A Contract with God* (1978), composed of four comic short stories that together formed a work of 180 pages, as a graphic novel (see fig. 4).[20] In contemporary usage, the term "graphic novel" is applied to non-serial, book-length comics that are narratively complex and have themes taken from everyday life.[21]



Fig. 4: From Will Eisner, *A Contract with God,* p. 86, the "graphic novel" that established a new genre.

18   Drechsel/Funhoff/Hoffmann 1975, 80.
19   The comic strip Dilbert is an integral part of almost 2,000 daily or weekly magazines; see https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dilbert [accessed 21 Nov. 2016]. Equally famous is Hagar the Horrible, a strip that is similarly widely published; see http://kingfeatures.com/comics/comics-a-z/?id=Hagar–The–Horrible [accessed 21 Nov. 2016]. Both strips are excellent examples of reception-oriented products. Dilbert addresses an audience comprising young technophiles who question authority more generally and in their own managerial structures in particular. Hagar is focused on the upper middle class who in their everyday life face challenges much like those faced by Hagar.
20   Eisner 2006, III.
21   This definition is not undisputed, but there is consensus that "comic" designates the main concept and "graphic novel" the species. See the description by McCloud 2001.

The *cartoon* (see fig. 5) is a further subcategory, usually employed for an individual drawing on the border between comic and caricature that is self-standing and has only a few of the typical characteristics of the comic (see below).[22] The cartoon will often make reference to contemporary political and/or social context.



Fig. 5: Ralph Ruthe, *Cartoon #3031*, in: http://ruthe.de/cartoon/3031/ datum/asc/ [accessed 5 Dec. 2016].

## FORMAL FEATURES

Fundamentally, a comic is a single drawing or series of drawings that tells a story (narrative element), with the depiction reduced to its essential components (abstracting element); the explanatory, verbal text is of secondary importance (priority of the image); the narrative is not bound to time (multitemporality); and the whole provides readers with new interpretative meanings (polyperception).

### NARRATIVE ELEMENT
A comic is a drawing that narrates a story that may be known or completely new. Unlike the classic painting, a comic has a narrative that is not limited to

22    In the Anglo-American context, "cartoon" (short: "toon") is also used to designate the animated short film.

the depiction of moment or phase. The comic can comprise a single image, a number of images, or many pages of images, but in each case, decisively, a process is depicted that goes beyond the moment. This narrative quality is both an essential element of a comic and simultaneously the comic's main signifier. As Scott McCloud has pointed out, the "gutter" – the term for the spacing between panels on a page – also plays a significant role in the narration. McCloud has argued that comic drawings only sketch selected phases and that readers are required to fill the gaps with their creative phantasy,[23] but his argument can be challenged, for (1) a single panel in a series can cover a longer timespan and (2) some comics have no gutter simply because they consist of a single image.



Fig. 6: Hagar the Horrible, from Browne, *Harte Zeiten*, n. p.

Fig. 6, a cartoon by Dik Browne, provides an excellent example of narration in a single image. Helga, Hagar's wife, is a great proponent of cleanliness, as evinced by her spotless attire, neat hair, and decorative belt. She returns home after a brief trip away (the front door is open although it is night time) to find the house turned upside down. Her husband, her complete opposite when it comes to orderliness and hygiene (scruffy attire, sloppy shaving, spotty helmet), is sitting on the floor, defeated and, according to his grim facial expression, somewhat angry. Helga's exclamation "What has happened here?!!" makes evident the disparity between her knowledge and that of the reader: Helga, literally unbalanced by what she sees, asks about the cause of the chaos; the reader can see a single insect circling somewhat provocatively above Hagar, who still holds a flyswatter, as a weapon, in his hand. At the heart of this narration is the victory of the tiny fly over the mighty Viking. My description makes all too clear that no matter how detailed the explanation, when a visual gag (whether joke or cartoon) is expressed in words, it readily loses something of its subtext or humour. It speaks for the quality of the drawing that the cartoon can still amuse and divert readers even after my explanation.

If we are to understand the humour of this image, we need to know of the nature and function of furniture and of the status of orderliness and cleanliness

23   McCloud 1994, 66–68.

in Western tradition. To capture its full potential we need familiarity with the characters and an appropriate contextualisation. Decontextualised, the joke would be less comprehensible, with the paradox of the victory of the apparently hopelessly underpowered inferior over the powerful attacker lost.

ABSTRACTING ELEMENT

No visual art form, including drawings, can display all the details of an actual optical event. Even Albrecht Dürer's *Young Hare* (1502), acclaimed for its stunning naturalism, is no exception: despite all his loyalty to what he saw, Dürer had no choice but to abstract. As Ernst Gombrich pointed out, artists never portray everything they see; they show us only the essence of what they represent.[24] In comics such reduction is extensive, reaching a degree of abstraction that can take advantage, however, of the ambiguity it creates. With abstraction the need for similarity with the template decreases tremendously. A quantitative, but not necessarily qualitative, difference is created between the precisely executed drawing and the drawing flung down in a few strokes. A comparison of fig. 6, with its depiction of a "Viking prototype" and fig. 7, with its depiction of the Norse god Thor, Marvel's comic hero, is illustrative.

Although the execution of the Thor cover is colourful, realistic, and far more detailed, the strongly abstracted depiction of Hagar is no less dynamic than the image of the Norse god. The cartoonists have emphasised different aspects, primarily as a product of the message they intend to deliver. Umberto Eco has pointed out that the painter produces a significantly less realistic representation than the graphic art-
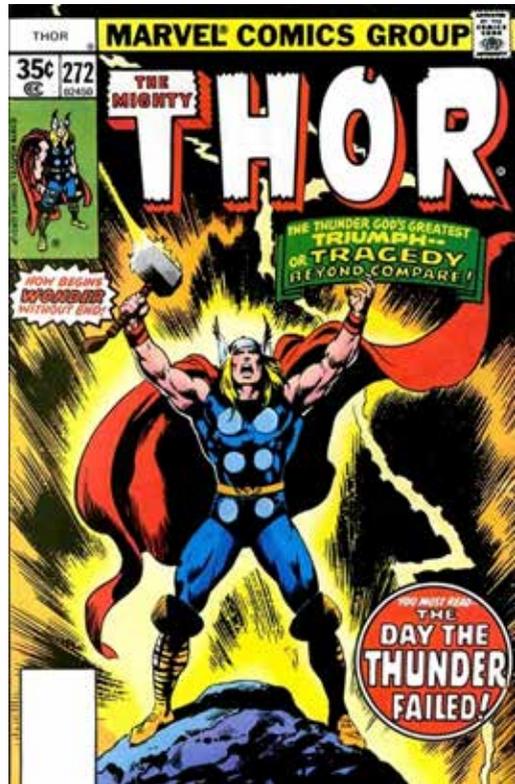


Fig. 7: John Buscema, Cover of Comic-Magazine *Thor*, No. 272, 1978.

24   Gombrich 2004, 55–78, esp. 73.

ist. A drawing captures at least one characteristic that is real (the outline), but a painting works with much more ambiguous features, namely colour and density. Eco proposed that an image's iconic quality stems not from the depiction but from the conventions met by illustrator and viewer in a minimal consensus.[25]

## PRIMACY OF THE PICTURE

The weighting of picture and text can be reversed in illustrated narration. Conventionally, text outweighs pictures, with the latter often static and used sparsely. In comics, however, pictures dominate the text, with words necessary only when the picture on its own cannot fulfil the narrative purpose.
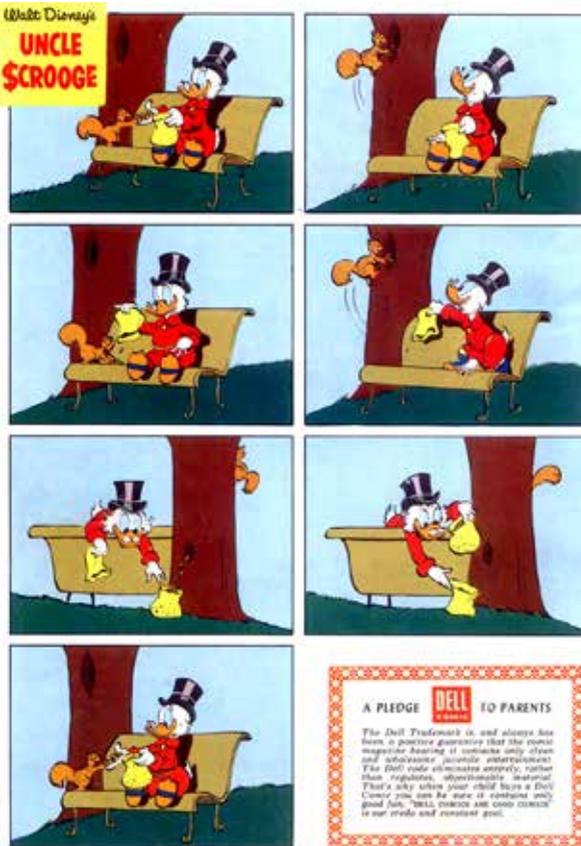


The noteworthy single-page cartoon in fig. 9 makes its point without using a single word, a rare exception in Carl Barks' work.[26] The priority of the picture allows the comic to traverse language barriers – in Michael Haneke's film 71 FRAGMENTS OF A CHRONOLOGY OF CHANCES (AT, 1994) a homeless refugee child steals a comic in the hope that "reading" it will provide security, comfort, or even amusement.[27]

Fig. 9: Carl Barks, *Uncle Scrooge* 11 (09/1955), 35.

25  Eco 2002, 209–210.
26  The intervention from the publishing house at the bottom right is remarkable. It addresses the preconception that comics are trash and therefore harmful to youth. The Dell code introduced in 1955 was intended to prevent such preconceptions. I sincerely thank Ernst Horst for drawing my attention to this aspect.
27  71 FRAGMENTS OF A CHRONOLOGY OF CHANCES (Michael Haneke, AT 1994), 00:18:04.

## POLYPERCEPTION

A visual medium is usually subject to distinct framing. For comics these boundaries are traditionally established through the use of panels. Arranged on a page in rows and sections, such panels structure the perception process in terms of both place and time. On one hand, the sequencing of pictures/images is established, with a line of montage from which the "reader" can deviate only with great difficulty (for an example of this challenge, see fig. 10). On the other hand, however, this structure opens up a new visual field through interruption, for unlike film, which is bound to projection formats or pixel resolution, the picture/image in a comic can be altered, can break boundaries, and can allow different weightings within representations of the "reality" of a narrative (see fig. 11, and also fig. 1). Freed from all narrative conventions, one character can appear multiple times in a single panel, for the act of reception is open to freely established rhythms of perception. The author cannot then expect that the conventional reception order will be followed by the reader, who might linger on one page, look repeatedly at one or more panel, or turn back to previous pages to enjoy certain passages again. This abandonment of



Fig. 10: The temporal sequence is fixed by convention – in Chinese / Japanese culture the traditional direction of reading is from right to left. N.N., *Meister Pao Blauhimmel, Das Geheimnis des unterschobenen Leichnams (I shih chia-huo)*, in: Wolfgang Bauer, *Chinesische Comics,* 45.

limits – the drawn reality is perceived without boundary-setting boxes – brings the comic closer to physical reality than a movie, for example, which is strictly limited to the film's frame.[28]

Another exclusive polyperceptive feature of the comic is the artist's/viewer's ability to read the mind of the characters. The thought bubble is a distinctive expressive form (see lower panels of fig. 12) and in revealing a character's thinking provides the reader with knowledge that the other characters in the comic do not possess. Neither film nor computer game can deploy this possibility, other than in the inner monologue borrowed from literature, unless it draws on the comic's toolset.[29]



Fig. 11: Milo Manara, *Tag des Zornes*, 70. Even when an intuitive reading direction is adopted leading left–right and top–bottom, the internal ordering of the panel is dislocated (polylocation) and panel boundaries are broken.

28   The split-screen technique, invented in the cinema of the late 1920s, is not comparable as it only further divides the limited space provided by the film frame (the projection screen) into smaller units (cf. Monaco 2001, 103–109, esp. 105). By contrast, the comic leaves the eye of the viewer free to choose its own distance, rhythm, and sequence; the viewer can "read" a whole page or a panel again, look back to earlier images, and ignore the gutter at will.

29   Examples of this strategy to surmount frames and to depict polylocation and time flow can be found, however, early in art history. A famous example is provided by the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, where Michelangelo indicated God's dynamis by depicting God from the front and from behind simultaneously; cf. Toman 2010, 518–519.

# FUNCTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

## THE SPECIFIC RECEPTION SITUATION

Schleiermacher defined hermeneutics in summary as a process that seeks to remedy the fundamental misconceptions that encompass every human communication. Such correction can be found in the circular and active interaction of reader and text[30] that he deemed necessary for the reception process from its outset.[31] An appropriate frame of comprehension (or *texture* in the case of comics) will allow a precise process-oriented understanding of the text. An earlier understanding is corrected and a hermeneutic draft simultaneously developed, producing a profound new understanding of the texture, which becomes its own pre-understanding (the hermeneutic circle). Every texture can be considered, and every significant texture *must* be considered, in this light. And Hans-Georg Gadamer ponders whether it is truly sufficient for understanding to mean the avoidance of misunderstanding, for, he asks, does not every misunderstanding require a supporting understanding?[32]

The supporting understanding that precedes every understanding – and also every misunderstanding – is tied to the possibility of comprehension or miscomprehension. Every texture is seen by the recipient through this precondition, and if a texture is incomprehensible, the reception is bound to fail. Here we have a balance between precision and ambiguity: the richer a medium's communicative potential, the greater the challenge for the hermeneutic process; in reverse, however, an accurate and singular description – a mathematical formula, for example – has a minimum of hermeneutic requirements and a single possible meaning.

The reception of comics as viewed in this context is very specific and expressed synaesthetically: sound, smell, taste, and touch are transformed into the visual effect contained by the picture and the word; lines give the impression of movement; time's course is defined by the sequence of panels.[33] Drechsel/Funhoff/Hoffmann note that comics do not follow the laws of reality that we humans expect, with our logics of space, time, and dimension.[34]

A fine example of synaesthetical expression can be seen in fig. 11: while word and picture complement each other, the picture dominates; smell is expressed by facial colour and facial expression; the reproduction of the scene is accompanied by sounds that can be "heard" in onomatopoetic articulation outside the speech bubbles ("Fschchch", "Schnupper Schnupper"), movement is por-

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30  Schleiermacher 1838, 30.
31  Schleiermacher 1838, 189. While Schleiermacher discusses the example of dialogue, his results are compelling for all forms of communication.
32  Gadamer 1990, vol. II, 223.
33  Other media might utilize synaesthetic approaches, but only the comic is necessarily synaesthetic.
34  Drechsel/Funhoff/Hoffmann 1975, 94.

Fig. 11: Albert Uderzo / René Goscinny, *Asterix and the Soothsayer* (Asterix Vol. 19),
Stuttgart: Delta 1972, 30.

trayed by lines indicting motion; lines that suggest vibration bring something
tactile to the image. The sequence of the panels, which follows Western read-
ing habits that work from left to right and from top to bottom, provides a time
line. The presentation is inherently visual, but the overall impression engages
all the senses.

According to Gadamer, in our reception of the image we anticipate that the
texture is comprehensible, that it will provide coherent meaning. We thus start
with a premise of perfectness that is lost only when the subject of our reception
appears incomprehensible. This anticipation is related not only to form, but also
to content, with our expectation, Gadamer notes, of a relationship between
truth and meaning.[35]

Gadamer starts from the genus of text and stays true, perhaps surprisingly,
to the original orientation of hermeneutics, which dealt with the interpretation
of authentic writings – texts with historical or religious claims. From this posi-
tion, however, in an extension of Heidegger's description of the hermeneutical
circle he postulates that understanding precedes every concrete act and is in
effect inherently transcendent. Every method, every formal means of access is
secondary to the interrelated act and framework of understanding. That posi-
tion is adopted specifically with reference to works of art, to which Gadamer

35  Gadamer 1990, vol. II, 62.

devotes a section of his *Wahrheit und Methode.*[36] The subject, he writes, is the work of art itself, not the subjectivity of the individual who experiences that work of art. For Gadamer the game has its own being, independent of those who play the game.[37] Just as the game masters its players, so too the work of art masters those who create and observe it.

Gadamer assumes that the work of art wants to be taken seriously. But does this interpretation stand for a comic? What if the image does not want to be taken seriously, if its form already makes evident that it is humorous, utopian, dystopian, or somehow remote? Gadamer's game analogy allows that even in its apparent not-wanting-to-be-taken-seriously, the comic does want to be taken seriously. It is a subject, not an object, and a partner in the hermeneutic process. This proposal leads us back to Dreschel's claim that a comic unseen by producers, market, and consumers cannot be. In other words, "the comic" as an abstract does not exist; it must be considered a dynamic product of the reception process that is, in turn, determined by its basic functions.

## ENTERTAINMENT FUNCTION

A comic lives decisively from its ability to entertain. The drawings delight in detailed and skilful imagery of what is unusual; the stories are designed for brevity and tension. Some comics are reduced to these aspects alone, but in most cases the entertainment factor serves as a medium for other functions. Yet the relegation of their entertainment function in favour of apparently more important factors can lead to the complete failure of the medium. A telling example of such failure is found in the ambitious experiment that seeks to portray Scripture according to the popular comics genre. The Deutsche Bibelstiftung made several attempts to this end in the early 1980s, but the unskilled and, as a result, loveless product ensured the series failed, despite a good story line with high moral standards (see fig. 12 and 13).[38]

Fig. 12 (r.): André Leblanc, *Der König kommt [The King comes]*, unpaginated. The important pericope John 2:1–11 is summarised on just one page.

36  Gadamer 1990, vol. I, 107–174.
37  Gadamer 1990, vol. I, 108.
38  Every translation of the Bible is a sensitive subject, and both successful and failed attempts abound. The following examples demonstrate how a comic can miss its target audience completely.
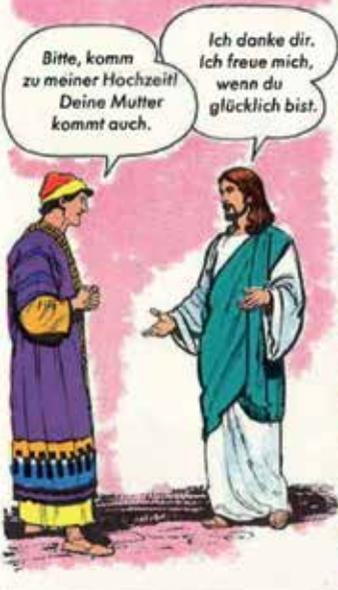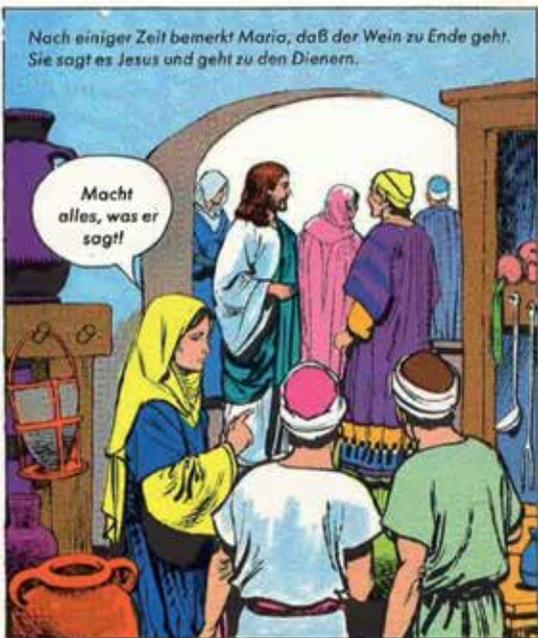
Fig. 13: Norbert Scholl, *Unruhe in der Provinz [Unrest in the provinces]*, 37: the significant verses in Mark 10:17–22 are reduced to a few (horribly bad) pictures with the message distorted: Jesus' call for his followers to sell their possessions is launched in Mark with the words "One thing thou lackest", as a condition for "perfection" (even more evident in the parallel Matthew 19:21: "If thou wilt be perfect"), which is not what the questioner has asked for. The concept is omitted from the comic, giving the pericope a very different meaning.

## MORAL FUNCTION

The earliest examples that can be attributed to the comic genre were intended not as entertainment, but as instruction and moral example. The *ars moriendi* scene in fig. 2 is not intended to amuse. It was designed as an appeal for a spiritual response by an individual facing inevitable death and it vividly presents the consequences of persisting in sin, with the demons pointing to the mortal sins of pride and vanity. In light of the extensive circulation of this medium, the comic was evidently becoming a vehicle for broader understandings of what made a life good or bad.

Ironically the comic developed intense messages about right and wrong precisely in contexts where it was perceived as disgraceful, by the cultural establishment and by psychologists.[39] The Disney character Donald Duck is a paradigm of this form. Donald Duck bears the typical everyday problems of the common man without obviously favouring a certain political system or religious faith. Despite occasional violations of the rules, he stands up for fundamental values (or is persuaded by his nephews to follow the value system). In the narrative of *The Persistent Postman*, he is forced to deliver a letter from his rival Gus Goose to his beloved Daisy. Jealous, he decides to "lose" the letter in a raging snowstorm, but he then heeds his conscience and tries to find the letter again (fig. 14a). He succeeds, but then loses the letter once more, this time uninten-



39   See Wertham 1955.
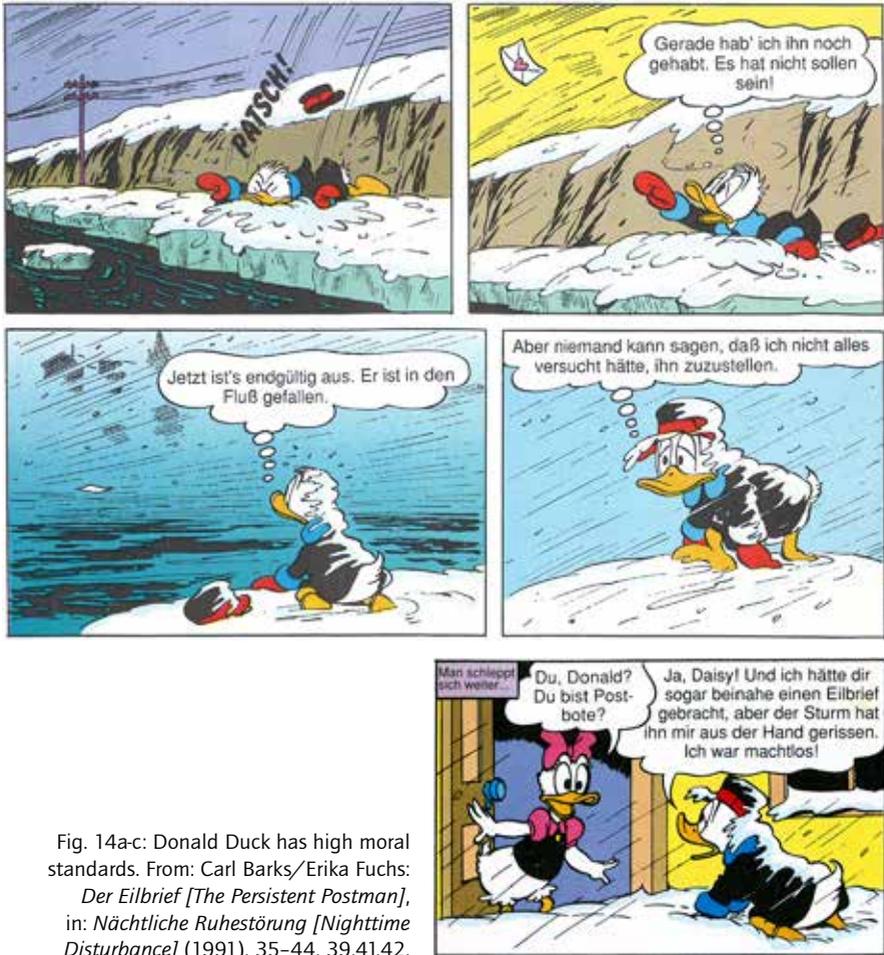
Fig. 14a-c: Donald Duck has high moral standards. From: Carl Barks∕Erika Fuchs: *Der Eilbrief [The Persistent Postman]*, in: *Nächtliche Ruhestörung [Nighttime Disturbance]* (1991), 35–44, 39.41.42.

tionally (fig. 14b). Empty handed, he makes his way to Daisy to admit his failure (fig. 14c). The moral message is plain: perform your duty even if it seems odious and do be not afraid of admitting failure. Here as in so many other instances Donald Duck precisely illustrates Kant's categorical imperative.[40]

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40    Within limits: the Donald Duck stories by Carl Barks were exceptionally well translated into German by Erika Fuchs; other less skilful artists too easily fall into cheap moralizing.

## AFFIRMATIVE AND PROPAGANDISTIC FUNCTION

Unlike with the moral function, the comic's propagandistic function is used to affirm an existing political system and to persuade recipients to show affirmative behaviour. A prime example is provided by American superhero comics of the 1930s and 1940s, in which the Western democratic system and the legitimacy of its actions, including its military actions, are clearly presented. From the beginning Superman was a model of the great (American) patriot,[41] while *Captain America* was "created specifically to combat what was un-American".[42] In Japan, *The Adventures of Dankichi* conveyed the legitimacy of Japanese expansion in Southeast Asia. In Italy, the character Dick Fulmine re-created Mussolini's physiognomy, and the comics in which he appeared were subjected to regular censorship.[43]

The Soviet Union, however, did not draw from the comic well, with only a single magazine for children, *Veselye Kartinki*, which first appeared in 1956, containing comic-like stories. The comic genre had a dubious reputation as decadent, primitive, and American.[44] In East Germany, however, *Mosaik* advertised in its own way the cultural and technical advantages of the Soviet Union over the West.[45] China liked to use comics to convey desirable system-compliant behaviour, with millions of comics printed and distributed to this end during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) (see fig. 15).[46]
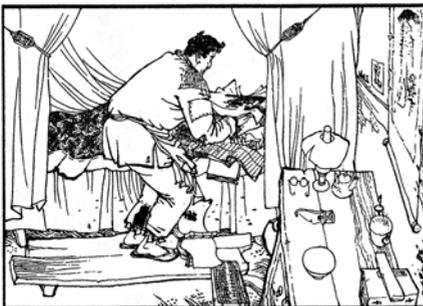


»Ich kaufte von ihm eine Maschinenpistole, um für die Zukunft gerüstet zu sein. Diese Maschinenpistole . . . ist unter meinem Bett. Ich habe keine Ruhe . . . schau nach . . .« Ma Yung-kuei zieht ein Ölpapierpaket hervor.

T'uan-t'uan flüstert: »Die haben eine Maschinenpistole! Schnell – wir sagen es Opa Lung-kuan!« Der hält die Sache für so wichtig, daß er nachts den nächsten Posten der Befreiungsarmee verständigt.

Fig. 15: Denunciation as a desirable behaviour. N.N., *Zwei kleine Detektive [Two Little Detectives]*, in: Wolfgang Bauer, *Chinesische Comics*, 216_217.

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41  Drechsel/Funhoff/Hoffmann 1975, 107–108.
42  Gubern 1978, 20.
43  Fossati 1990, 90–91.
44  Zhirkoreva 2013.
45  See Frahm 2010. Launched in 1955, Mosaik is still published today and is therefore the oldest continuous German comic series.
46  See Bauer 1979; Kluver 2011, 237–254.

Islamic terror organisations such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) or al-Qaeda have two principal reasons for not using comics for propaganda purposes: a strong tradition in Islam of rejecting images,[47] and the primary orientation of the largest audience in IS towards social media, which means that a comic would miss its target audience. In the last months, there are rare examples for subversive islamistic propaganda in popular Marvel comics;[48] however, the thriving comic scene in moderate Islam is mostly system critical.[49]

## SYSTEM-CRITICAL FUNCTION

Comics can also contain a system-critical and subversive potential. Disdained in the Soviet Union, the comics that reached the hands of the ruling class presented the Western way of life as very attractive, and were therefore potentially troublesome. Numerous more-current examples can also be cited: in India, which is characterised by strong traditions and social continuities, in addition to innumerable system-affirming comics, comics that convey social-political themes confronting the social and religious traditions of the country are also sold in great number. Such comics broach issues such as homosexuality, women's rights, social injustice, and the military and political orientation of the country.[50]

For Iranian culture, the film adaptation of *Persepolis* by Marjana Satrapi has gained international renown. In this comic movie, Satrapi deals with her childhood in Iran, engaging Iranian social and political conditions critically.[51] Indonesia has a thriving comic scene that denounces hypocrisy and corruption in local politics.[52] For Europe we can cite cartoonist Olaf Schwarzbach, who until his escape from East Germany in 1989 was under observation by state security because of his system-critical drawings.[53] Feminist discussions have also produced a long series of comic publications.[54] More recently, comics have been used as means of raising awareness against Islamism, and in particular against IS (see fig. 16).

47  Although the Qur'an does not strictly regulate aniconism (like Exod 20:1–6 and Deut 4:15–19, the suras 5:90 and 6:74 are directed against pagan idols and their veneration) but early hadith indicate a fundamental mistrust of pictures in general; cf. Paret 1976, 158–181.

48  Marvel had to withdraw parts of X-Men Gold #1 due to hidden islamistic messages one of the artists hid in some panels (see http://news.orf.at//stories/2386857/ [accessed 10 Apr. 2017]).

49  See https://de.qantara.de/search/overview/comic [accessed 15 Dec. 2016]; I thank Ulrike Bechmann for this reference.

50  See Otto 2014, 79.

51  Satrapi 2005; filmed by Marjana Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, FR/US 2007.

52  See https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/comicszene-in-indonesien-goldenes-zeitalter-fur-talente [accessed 15 Dec. 2016].

53  See Schwarzbach 2015. Unfortunately little original material from Schwarzbach's years in the GDR has survived, partly as the result of raids by the Stasi, and partly because when Schwarzbach fled in 1989, he took with him only what he could carry.

54  Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List–of–feminist–comic–books [accessed 3 Dec. 2016]. It is noteworthy that many such books are the work of men.

Fig. 16: Harris, Eleri Mai, Where did Islamic State come from, and what does it really want?, in: http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-06/where-did-is-come-from,-and-what-does-it-really-want/7369802 [accessed 6 Dec. 2016].

## SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

The relationship between text and picture has changed several times in history. In the 19th century, innovations in technical production and reproduction were accompanied by the growing importance of the picture, in particular after the second half of the 19th century, and they gained tremendous momentum through audiovisual media, film and television.[55] In the internet-based media of

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55  As Paul Virilio (1991) showed, technical development and the audience's affinity with the products thus made possible the formation of a circle. He locates the arms industry as the main stimulus for this development. In this context, it is of importance that the roots of the internet also lie in military purposes. The ARPAnet of the late 1960s was developed at the command of the U.S. Ministry of Defence.

the late 20th century, the text became more important again, and once more the technical framework played a role: the connection speed of the network for individual and private use remained relatively low until the late 1990s, such that the transfer of pictures and of videos in particular remained the exception.[56] However, since the triumph of the interactive digital media, made possible by the exponential increase of network speed and the establishment of mobile devices as a normal form of network participation in the last two decades, an increased concentration on the (moving) image can be observed, yet without neglecting text completely.

But in electronic media the nature of this text has changed again: it is used mainly to explain the pictorial representation. The text aims at either defining a picture that is inherently plurivalent, or it opens new horizons of meaning that cannot be seen clearly in the image as such. Language is increasingly contracted to slogans, onomatopoetic descriptions (*giggle*), acronyms (*ROFL*) or shortened without regard for grammatical conventions.[57] The parallels with the comic are obvious: Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Snapchat seem to function according to similar rules, just like the well-known medium of the illustrated booklet.

So the comic could develop striking potential in the current media environment. As we have seen, comics are characterised by abstraction, a compressed form of narration, concentration on images, and delimitation. Like comics, social media is dominated by shortened, contracted language, and narrative is reduced to a minimum. The image dominates the text but is still dependent on it. Abstract image elements that utilise characters are employed, as in the case of emoticons and memes. Even more fascinating are the possibilities thrown up by the debate on virtuality, given new stimulus since 2014 by technical developments. The promises of a "virtual [in the sense of 'actual'] reality" that dominated the discussion in the 1980s[58] have given way to a realisation that abstraction must remain, despite all the potential in technical improvement. In his book *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich has noted with reference to simulated reality:

> To support the idea of progress of computer graphics toward realism, researchers privilege particular subjects that culturally connote the mastery of illusionistic repre-

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56  I experienced the dawn of the internet in the 1980s using a device called an acoustic coupler, which had a 300 bit/second transmission rate. Today, for private use 100Mbit is not uncommon (a speed increase by 3x105).

57  Cf. Wessely 2005.

58  Moravec 1994, 86. Hans Moravec, AI researcher and robot engineer at Carnegie Mellon University, has written, "newest studies of the anatomy of the brain have shown that the most mysterious spiritual phenomena have a physical cause. I do no doubt that a mechanical process like data processing in a computer may induce intense spiritual experience [of the computer itself, my remark]" (my translation).

sentation. […] In summary, the differences between cinematic and synthetic realism begin on the level of ontology. New Realism is partial and uneven, rather than analog and uniform. The artificial reality that can be simulated with 3-D computer graphics is fundamentally incomplete, full of gaps and white spots.[59]

Manovich draws our attention to a fundamental fact: despite all the achievements of computer-generated reality, it remains ontologically different from physical reality, and the immersion of users in that computer-generated reality ultimately requires abstraction and delimitation.

Two particular implications should be recognised. First, it is both legitimate and desirable for the tools of comic analysis and comic interpretation to be deployed in the interpretation of media products in the context of Web 2.0. Secondly, when media content is created in this environment, the methods of comics can be deployed to make the message conveyed both more accessible and more acceptable. The comic genre is surely entitled to a place in media theory, especially in the media environment of the 21st century.

And of course it is very interesting to observe that in the western societies that are largely perceived as almost completely secularised, religious symbols and structures are still important stylistic devices as well as sales arguments in contemporary media products. Theology and Religious Studies will be well advised to watch the further development closely, not only commenting them but also reflecting them on a level as high as possible.

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## FILMOGRAPHY

71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chances (Michael Haneke, AT 1994).

Theresia Heimerl

# Rampant Lechers, Chaste Heroes

## (De-)Sexualised Violence
## in Comic book Screen Adaptations

## ABSTRACT

Violence is a central element of comic book screen adaptations in both Hollywood (Marvel, DC) and Japan. Yet while sexual violence is openly shown in film versions of manga, coded sexualised violence dominates Western productions. Positively connoted protagonists exercise violence, but no sexualised or sexual violence, in both groups. Conversely, villains are characterised by violence and some form of sexually grounded violence, but in Western films, they are ultimately repressed lechers, and only in Japanese productions do they rampantly lose their inhibitory control. Moreover, the heroes of Japanese films are noticeably less chaste than the almost ascetic-celibate romantics of Marvel and DC.

## KEYWORDS

sexual violence, comic heroes, Lone Wolf and Cub, Daredevil, Watchmen, Deadpool, religious narrative

## BIOGRAPHY

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## INTRODUCTION

A reviewer keeping track of the numerous screen adaptations of Marvel and DC comics released in the United States over the past decade would be hard pressed (with only two exceptions) to find one thing: sex. A dash of bittersweet romance, in rare cases a hint that "it" might happen or, indeed, has already happened, certainly, but no sex. Conversely, violence is omnipresent in film adaptations of the two big publishers' comics, albeit to distinctly varying degrees, reflecting the respective target group, i.e. whether a PG-13 rating was sought. The other country that produces large numbers of commercially successful comics

and their screen adaptations is Japan. Here we are talking about manga and manga-inspired anime or live-action films, and here both sex and violence exist to a degree that runs counter to Western viewing conventions. This article explores the correlations between the two *scandala* sex and violence, with a focus on their importance for the embodiments of good and evil: the hero and villain. Its goal is to identify potential interrelationships and analyse their dependence on, or independence of, their cultural context. These contexts include religion broadly framed; for this reason, the last section of this article will examine the role played by religion in these potential interrelationships and modes of presentation.

On the one hand, this article deals with screen adaptations of Marvel and DC comics, all of which take the form of lavishly produced motion pictures or TV series enjoying reasonable to huge commercial success. On the other hand, it looks at film adaptations of manga, a situation that is definitely more complex: to begin with, the field is not dominated by just two comparable, market-dominating publishers, but is made up of numerous studios and magazines, the best-known of which, *Shonen Jump,* publishes manga produced by a variety of publishing houses.[1] Likewise, Japan has no clear-cut equivalent of the superhero genre typical of the screen adaptations of Marvel and DC comics; instead, protagonists with special powers or just extremely sophisticated combat techniques in the style of BATMAN (Christopher Nolan, US 2005) or DAREDEVIL (US 2015–)[2] appear in several genres. The scope of this is therefore limited to the action genre, with some excursions into fantasy/mystery, as well as to clearly identified male heroes and antagonists. It  leaves out *mecha*, uses very well-known and popular – at least in Japan – screen adaptations such as LONE WOLF AND CUB (Kazuo Koike/Goseki Kojima, JP 1972–1974)[3] as examples, and, in the case of more recent productions, chooses works that are recognisable to the extent that they have been merchandised outside Japan as well. All referenced works are *shonen* or *seinen* manga, i.e. manga primarily targeted at an audience of male adolescents or male adults aged over 18 years[4] and hence are highly comparable with the cinema or TV adaptations of Marvel and DC comics covered in this text.

1    See http://www.shonenjump.com/e/ [accessed 25.4.2017]; regarding the manga market, see Köhn 2016.

2    References to comics are always made as follows: *title*: publisher year(s), writer/illustrator, here: *Batman*: DC 1939–, Bob Kane/Bill Finger; the films mentioned here are BATMAN BEGINS (Christopher Nolan, US 2005) and THE DARK KNIGHT (Christopher Nolan, US 2008); *Daredevil*: Marvel 1964–, Stan Lee/Bill Everett and Jack Kirby; the adaptation discussed here is DAREDEVIL, TV series (2x13 episodes, US 2015–).

3    *Konzure Okami/Lone Wolf and Cub:* Futabasha 1970–78, Kazuo Koike/Goseki Kojima; live-action motion picture series composed of six films (JPN 1972–1974). The films referenced in this paper are SWORD OF VENGEANCE (Kenji Misumi, JPN 1972) and BABY CART TO HADES (Kenji Misumi, JPN 1972).

4    Regarding genres, cf. Brunner 2010; and Bryce/Davis 2010, 34–61.

# VIOLENCE AND SEX IN COMIC BOOK SCREEN ADAPTATIONS

Violence is a central element of commercially oriented comic book adaptations for the screen in both Hollywood and Japan. The conventions of what may be shown, however, vary markedly, with differences also identifiable within the scope of Western, i.e. U.S. productions: if a "big" Marvel or DC comic adaptation is planned, the film usually aims for a PG-13 rating, which results in presentations of violence that are relatively free of bloody and physical imagery. Deliberately alternative films such as DEADPOOL (Tim Miller, US 2016) or WATCHMEN (Zack Snyder, US 2009)[5] or TV series like DAREDEVIL (2015-) increasingly approach an explicitness of physical violence that is typical of Japanese anime or live-action manga adaptations. In this context, "explicit" is understood as the realistic to hyper-realistic portrayal, in close-up, of the deformative effects of violence on the body, in particular the depiction of open wounds and blood gushing forth, as well as the often irreversible destruction of parts of the human body. In both Western and Japanese comic book adaptations for the screen, physical violence is meted out both by heroes or positively connoted characters and by their antagonists. Conventional comic book adaptations – this may already be stated at this point – not only cannot make do without violence, but also have violence as a central element of the visual experience in the cinema or before the TV set.

This observation does not apply to sex. In U.S. mainstream movies or TV series in the genre of comic book adaptations, even erotic scenes where bedsheets are positioned strategically in typical Hollywood style are almost entirely lacking. This – at least visually – asexual existence is a hallmark not only of the heroes but of their evil counterparts as well. As excessively as villains might behave in other respects, active sexuality is not among the sins they are punished for by the hero. An aspect that will be discussed below concerns the fact that closer inspection reveals the baddies to be not truly asexual but rather imbued by an inhibited, non-heteronormative sexuality which is part of the character traits underlying their evil actions. In the universe of well-known Marvel and DC comic book adaptations, there are, however, two successful (also commercially) exceptions to this observation: DEADPOOL (2016) and WATCHMEN (2009). In almost every respect, DEADPOOL deliberately caricatures the image of the noble superhero: Wade Wilson is a semi-alcoholic petty criminal who first enjoys a quite unromantic but intense one-night stand with his future partner before they embark on a relationship marked by very explicit, animalistic sexuality. His superhero career takes off following a dubious cancer therapy, and his hunt for the villain serves the exclusive purpose of personal revenge, although it does

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5    *Deadpool*: Marvel 1991–, Fabian Nicieza/Rob Liefeld; screen adaptation: DEADPOOL (Tim Miller, US 2016); *Watchmen*: DC 1986/87 (graphic novel), Alan Moore/Dave Gibbons; screen adaptation: WATCHMEN (Zack Snyder, US 2009).

culminate in the salvation of his damsel in distress. DEADPOOL (2016) deliberately targets an audience that is just outside the PG-13 rating range and hence can make fun, along with the hero, of the squeaky-clean goody two-shoes peopling other comic book adaptations.

An even tougher path is chosen by the big-screen adaptation of the DC comic WATCHMEN (2009): the titular group of superheroes, who are publicly reviled post-1968 as brutal enforcers embroiled in government operations, for example in Vietnam, come across as a cynical, down-at-heel bunch whose members yearn to find meaning in life now that their superhero glory days are over.[6] We actually meet a superhero, called The Comedian, who kills women and children and tries to rape a female superhero colleague. Admittedly, other than at the very beginning of the film he is only seen in flashbacks, as somebody pushes him out of a window after a short, brutal struggle during the introductory sequence. Moreover – and this is truly problematic from a feminist viewpoint – he also turns out to be the father of the young super-heroine, whose mother carries a nostalgic torch for him despite the violence and attempted rape: "Oh, we were still young. You don't know. Things change. What happened, happened 40 years ago […] the past, even the grimy parts of it keep on getting brighter." Alongside other motifs, the search for his killer determines the course of the plot, which – while containing much explicit and bloody violence – has nothing to offer in terms of sexual violence except the abovementioned scene.

In the cinematic adaptations of Japanese manga, the approach to sex is an entirely different one. Even outside the *hentai* genre, i.e. explicit pornography,[7] sexuality is shown with extreme bluntness when compared to Western visual sensibilities. Leaving out anime conceived solely for a target audience of young children and excluding certain youth protection regulations that, due to Western influence, also have been imposing restrictions on *shonen* manga and related film adaptations since the 1990s,[8] the depiction of sexuality in the action genre is integral to the plots of both anime and live-action film adaptations. This also goes for explicit sexual violence. It is simply a part of a patriarchal society that, while sometimes punished as an element of the plot-driving narrative, is far too often shown without any expression of deeper moral judgment, not even on the part of the hero. A scene from a very successful film adaptation from the 1970s provides a good example of this: KOZURE OKAMI (1972–1974), based on the eponymous manga and available in English as LONE WOLF AND CUB (1972–1974), is a series of six motion pictures in which Itto Ogami, a former *Kogi*

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6   Cf. Rauscher 2009, 42: "The hero concept of classic superhero comics is negated to a point that excludes any further nexus with this concept." Regarding the very critical reception of the film, cf. Van Ness 2010, 171–189.

7   Cf. Winter 2012, footnote 41.

8   Cf. Winter 2012, 16.

*Kaishakunin*[9] with almost supernatural combat skills, travels the country with his young son, offering his services as an assassin for hire; over time, he repeatedly meets members of the clan responsible for the death of his wife and his loss of status and engages them in bloody fights. In SWORD OF VENGEANCE, the first film from 1972, Itto Ogami comes to a village terrorised by *ronin*, samurai without a master. Ogami watches unmoved while one of the men rapes a young girl to death. He also does not start a fight with the bandits; when they threaten him, he has sex with a prostitute to demonstrate his fearlessness and probably also his masculinity. This scene is only outdone by another one in BABY CART TO HADES, also from 1972, when first the audience witnesses the gang rape of a mother and daughter by three wandering *watari-kashi*, itinerant low-class warriors. The fourth of these men then kills one of his companions to make him the scapegoat for the crime, before proceeding to murder the two raped women to protect the group's honour. When he notices Itto Ogami, who has been looking on, he apologises by simply saying, "I am sorry that you had to watch this unpleasant scene." Whereupon Ogami responds, "You act like a true warrior." What might still be justified here as a "historically accurate" representation of Japanese society in the early Edo period, in the 17th or 18th centuries, can also be found in screen adaptation of comics set in the recent past or the present: sexuality and sexual violence as realities that are part of the narrative.

## INTERRELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SEX AND VIOLENCE

It may thus be argued that the depiction of violence in screen adaptations of comics transcends cultures, while sex is mostly blanked out in the Western context. The following section will address the question of whether interrelationships between sex (even if not shown) and violence exist, and, if so, what form they take.

For this purpose, we will first look at the villains: in almost ideal-typical manner, the villains in the screen adaptations of Marvel and DC comics embody the Augustinian concept of evil as a result of desire.[10] All these villains are characterised by a desire that overlays all other traits, even potentially positive ones: lust for power (world domination, etc.), for revenge following a perceived or actual wrong, for possession (usually of means required to obtain power), or, simply, for the destabilisation of the established order in order to create a chaotic regime of terror.

Quite often, this desire is shown as erotic desire gone off the rails – a desire the villain is unable to physically enact, since he is either deformed or outs him-

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9    A *Kogi Ksishakunin* is a warrior officially charged by the shogun to carry out executions, a fictional position invented for *Lone Wolf and Cub*, see World Heritage Encyclopedia 2017.

10   See Brown 1991, 424–432.

self, through clothing and behaviour, as non-heterosexual.[11] This stigmatisation of the villain as embodying an alternative sexual orientation is certainly not a prerogative of comic book screen adaptations, but rather emblematic of numerous other villains in many action movies, ranging from Bond antagonists to Philip Seymour Hoffman in MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE III (J. J. Abrams, US 2006).[12] Suppressed and misguided if perceived from the angle of heteronormativity embraced by Hollywood cinema, this sexuality furthermore finds expression in a sexually charged sadism that manifests itself through violence and power plays involving female victims, often with the ulterior motive of breaking down the hero's composure.[13] In this respect, however, the cinematic adaptations of Marvel and DC comics mostly limit themselves to hints which the audience may be able to decipher, but which do not require a higher age rating; thus the symbolic language of sexual violence is not implemented as real, graphically depicted sexual violence. Unfettered desire is a central trait of the villain, which derives its destructive effect not least from the fact that it represents sexually deformed desire finding expression in violence that may also be sexualised violence.

The hero distinguishes himself from the villain perhaps in no other respect as much as in this one. He does not desire, at least not in the way the villain does, whose voracity is written into his face and body, fully in line with the spirit of graphic stylisation inherent in his comic book origins; conversely, he strives for noble ideals like justice and freedom. Neither does he feel sexual desire as an expression of animalistic lust. He could fall in love with a woman or even does so. In this, the question of whether he will vent his romantic feelings through a sexual relationship with his beloved or will choose to abstain is resolved in various ways. Some heroes like Superman or Spiderman spend their cinematic life languishing and pining for their lady, while others like Thor are at least allowed a long-distance relationship with their love interest. Others – Ironman is a case in point – engage in a rather promiscuous lifestyle before following their heroic vocation but then change track to embrace option one or two. This largely celibate existence of the hero is often expressly thematised and justified with the argument that he is bound to dedicate himself entirely to his calling as saviour and opponent of evil, leaving little time for amorous entanglements, and above all by emphasising that a romantic attachment would tie him down

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11    A classic example of this is the Joker in the different Batman films, but Lex Luthor in the SUPERMAN movies or Loki in the two cinematic adaptations of THOR likewise embody a (at least latently) fluid sexuality. See Winstead 2015, 572–585.

12    See Beson-Allott 2012, 215f.

13    For example, the scene between the Joker and Rachel Dawes, Batman's love interest in THE DARK KNIGHT (Christopher Nolan, US 2008), where the villain's words, gestures and way of touching the female protagonist's face with his hand wielding a knife represent massive invasion.

and limit him in his heroic exploits,[14] which is usually demonstrated in films or TV series by the trope of having the villain abduct the hero's woman before she is spectacularly rescued by her paramour. Interestingly, this scenario also occurs if the hero actually has sex with his girlfriend in a manner quite obvious to the spectator, as for example in DEADPOOL (2016). The Western hero is part of the narrative of the damsel in distress, yet he is characterised even more by a total lack of sexualised violence. The nexus between sex and violence is, at most, negative, i.e. the systematic use of violence keeps the hero from engaging in a close sexual and emotional relationship; yet his potential for violence – which is thematised, sometimes drastically so[15] – would never exert influence on his erotic relationship. The heroes of Marvel and DC comics conform to the Western narrative of sexuality as part of a romantic attachment, which may include emotional dependence – the reason why the hero often hesitates to engage with it – but is always consensual and non-violent.

When we turn to Japanese manga adapted either as anime or live-action movies, a considerably more differentiated situation presents itself: while, depending on the genre, the narrative of the hero's romantic desire is indeed present occasionally, we much more frequently encounter fundamentally positively connoted protagonists who – other than where explicitly underage heroes and their association with the *shoujo* genre[16] are concerned – exhibit both a sexuality that may appear promiscuous to Western spectators' eyes and openly expressed desire without previous or accompanying emotional ties. However, one factor that likewise applies to these characters is their sexual partners' willingness. A positively connoted protagonist does not rape or coerce – he can get women anyway.

The situation is different for villains. Similar to the Western tradition of cinematic adaptations of Marvel and DC comics, in Japanese manga one basic trait of baddies lies in their excessive nature, their unfettered desire for whatever it is they hunger for. Some villains despise sexuality, regarding it merely as a necessary means to attain their goal, i.e. to satisfy their lust for power, such as Light Yagami from DEATH NOTE (JP 2006–2007),[17] a character also relatively well-known in the West, who emotionally subjugates the love-struck pop starlet Misa Amane for purely tactical reasons. However, this section will look more closely at two examples where sexualised or sexual violence is staged as the ultimate expression of the destructive power of evil. The former, i.e. sexualised violence, can be found paradigmatically in a scene from PSYCHO PASS (Katsuy-

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14   Cf. Heimerl 2016, 189f.
15   Cf. DAREDEVIL (2015–) and Christopher Nolan's BATMAN TRILOGY (2005, 2008, 2012).
16   That is, manga and anime for girls and young women.
17   *Death Note:* Konami 2003–2006, Tsugumi Ōba/Takeshi Obata; DEATH NOTE. Anime TV series (37 episodes, JPN 2006–2007)

uki Motohiro/Naoyoshi Shiotani, JPN 2012–2013),[18] an intellectually ambitious as well as commercially successful 22-episode anime TV series whose underlying theme is a post-Orwellian surveillance society, where both hero and villain are fighting for individual freedom, albeit with wildly different methods: evil Makashima holds a former classmate of female police officer Akane Tsunemori hostage before he kills the young woman by cutting her throat right before the horrified policewoman's eyes. This is preceded by a cynical discourse on the policewoman's dependence on the surveillance system while Makashima holds his scantily clad hostage directly in front of his body, repeatedly caressing her throat and body with his razor-armed hand. The sexualisation of this scene is blatant, yet no sexual action in the strict sense takes place. Instead, we witness a murder committed out of pure delight in power and in the terror the villain can thus instil in the heroine. Total power is presented as power over the female body and its sexuality. This is even truer of instances where sexual violence does indeed occur in a way clearly comparable with the abovementioned damsel-in-distress scenario from THE DARK KNIGHT (2008): provocation and humiliation of the hero through the exercise of violence and the threat to kill the hero's woman. The final scenes of BERSERK (Toshiyuki Kubooka, JPN 2013),[19] a film trilogy from 2012/13 based on a famous manga that appeared from 1989 on, present the following showdown between the villain (Griffith), who has transformed into a demon (and, in truly classic style, is also the hero's former best friend), and the hero (Guts) and his girlfriend (Casca), who is also secretly desired by the baddie: while Guts is struggling to free himself from the villain's hench-creatures, Griffith, who has become evil incarnate, rapes Casca repeatedly before the eyes of his former friend while keeping his cynical glare trailed at the hero. This is a near ideal-typical embodiment of the difference – only hinted at in the screen adaptations of Marvel and DC comics – between the good, "normal", consensual desire of the hero, as depicted earlier in BERSERK (2013) between Guts and Casca, and the perverted desire also revealed through the villain's transformed and perverted body.[20] Admittedly, BERSERK (2013) does not restrict itself to hints; rather, we witness first the hero's highly passionate but entirely consensual sexuality amid intact green nature and later, in a quasi "unnatural environment" cast in red-violet hues, sexual violence forced by the villain on the hero's beloved. The villain's objectives are clearly spelled out: (1) to demonstrate his absolute power and the impotence of both hero and woman, (2) to psychologically break both, i.e. the hero and his woman, and (3) to

18  PSYCHO PASS. Anime TV series (22 episodes, JPN 2012–2013), manga developed after anime.
19  *Berserk*: Hakusensha 1989–, Kentaro Miura; BERSERK: THE GOLDEN AGE ARC III – THE ADVENT (Toshiyuki Kubooka, JPN 2013).
20  On the transformation of the body as a symbol of the transformation into evil, see Feichtinger 2010, 21–25, 43–55.

attempt in this way to deprive the hero of his heroic status, reducing him to a victim or at least to an ambivalent character – which in fact does happen both in the manga and in the anime TV series released in 2016.[21] The above-described scene of sexual violence is also the villain's first action after his transformation into a supernatural being. It should be emphasised that BERSERK (2013) is no niche production but a widely known, long-lived manga and anime with a correspondingly ample merchandising background.

These few examples show clearly that the big bad villains in the screen versions of Marvel and DC comics are without exception veritable saints when compared with the evil antagonists of manga adaptations. Aspects only hinted at by Marvel and DC – i.e. the pure lust for destruction, not only of the world (which is obviously shown in opulent CGI), but also of the villain's human antagonist at both the psychological and physical levels – are acted out and shown in screen adaptations of manga. More specifically, this level also comprises sexual integrity in connection with women. However, it should be evident by now that the villains of screen adaptations both of Marvel and DC comics and of manga are not merely rampant lechers lacking inhibitory control. Rather, sexual desire is a sub-aspect of the desire for destructive power that is a defining trait of all these characters. Yet whether and how strongly this sub-aspect is acted out is hugely dependent on the respective tradition. Conversely, only in the Western tradition are heroes relatively chaste.

## SEX, GENDER, VIOLENCE

As a rule, the gender of sexual or sexualised violence in comic book screen adaptations is male, and male only. But are there exceptions? Does a sexually connoted violence exercised by women over men exist? A rather common narrative concerns the sexually harassed, degraded or even raped woman who, once she has transformed into a heroine, takes revenge on her tormentors. We encounter this motif in Marvel and DC comics – most recently in JESSICA JONES (US 2015)[22] – as well as in screen versions of various manga. Yet this revenge, while physically violent, is not sexualised and, at most, sexually connoted inasmuch as the man is deprived of his pride and masculinity in the social sense, and hence humiliated and publicly vilified. The motif is also well known outside comic book screen adaptations as the "rape-revenge motif".[23] Film versions of manga, too, are practically devoid of truly sexualised or sexual violence ex-

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21    BERSERK. Anime TV series (12 episodes, JPN 2016).
22    *Jessica Jones:* Marvel 2001–, Brian Michael Bendis/Michael Gaydos; JESSICA JONES. TV series (13 episodes, US 2015)
23    See Read 2000, in particular 103–124 and 155–204.

ercised by women against men, with the sole exception of kicks in the groin meted out during a fight.

Conversely, evil women in both traditions opt for sexual seduction,[24] which results in, or can result in, violence; however, the sexuality shown or alluded to always originates with male desire deliberately stimulated by female charms. Such attempts at manipulation could at most be interpreted as covert psychological violence to undermine the sexual integrity of the male character. The nexus between open physical violence, manifested as an actual assault on the body, and sexuality – in the sense that primary or secondary genitalia are touched against the other person's will – is almost exclusively restricted to men assaulting women.

## RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES?

This section will limit itself to one single question: does the religious background of the comic's narrative as part of the cultural background play a role in the depiction of sexuality and violence as well as of sexual or sexualised violence?

Let us look first at Marvel and DC comics. Much has been written about the religious connotations of various superheroes;[25] even an unabashedly and openly Catholic superhero like DAREDEVIL[26] has recently met with great popularity. However, the question of relevance for this paper is whether the above-described way of dealing with violence and sexuality can be explained through a (or, the respective) latently or openly religious narrative. The cultural backdrop for all screen adaptations of Marvel or DC comics discussed here is provided by the Judeo-Christian tradition, which is characterised by highly ambivalent positions regarding violence: already as cast by Saint Ambrose, the subversive-violent narratives of martyr legends tend to tip over into discreetly voyeuristic tales, to say nothing of the otherworldly, violence-drenched fantasies that we find not only in Tertullian or Saint Augustine, but also in such pious women as Saint Perpetua.[27] This was also the literary period that gave rise to the *topos* of the lecherous villain deprived of moral inhibitions yet unsuccessful in his lechery who resorts to sexualised violence to break his female Christian victims.[28] Conversely, the male Christian hero is quickly promoted from martyr to *miles Christi*, who – drawing his justification from Saint Augustine[29] – is certainly permitted to exercise violence against the enemies of God in order to help good prevail and

24  See Heimerl 2013, 160–171.
25  See Seydel 2009, 25–51, regarding the "ethnic origins" of Superman, cf. Tye 2012, 65–80.
26  See episodes 1.3, 1.9 and 1.13, in which the hero defines himself a "good Catholic boy".
27  See Heimerl 2014, 234–238.
28  Ibid. regarding the legend of Saint Agatha.
29  Augustine, Quaestiones in Heptateuchum VI, 10, PL 34,781; De Civitate Dei I, 21, PL 41,35.

reinstate divine order. Viewing the heroes of comic book screen adaptations replete with action scenes dripping with violence as incompatible with Christianity definitely does not correspond to the historical Christian mainstream, at least from the angle of religious history; rather, their way of tackling violence constitutes a secular continuation of the Augustinian-Thomist ethic of proportional violence for the benefit of the greater whole. It is hardly surprising that sexual violence is an absolute taboo for heroes rooted in this narrative tradition. Thus the question arises whether the erotic reticence of the heroes and their sometimes open commitment to a celibate lifestyle as a tribute to their service for the benefit of society are equally beholden to Christian tradition. In my opinion, it is impossible to give a definitive answer to this question. The lone hero who might be detracted from his mission by a romantic relationship is a frequent motif of Western narrative and cinematic tradition even outside the scope of comic book screen adaptations; in fact, its origins derived from the Christianisation of heroic narratives of classical antiquity would warrant more detailed examination. Much more evident is the fact that in the Christian tradition, contrary to pagan antiquity, sexual desire and its attainment through violence are always a stigma of evil, a direct sign of the villain's sinfulness. In this sense, the villains of film adaptations of Marvel and DC comics definitely embody a Christian and, in particular, an Augustinian tradition of evil, albeit in a post-Freudian, civilised, and atrophied manner, since they hardly ever manage to actually live their desire. Rather, they sublimate it in sexually grounded violence with odd fetishes and, of course, through their desire for power and domination in a general sense.

As we have seen, the entire field of sex and violence assumes quite a different colouring with regard to both heroes and villains if we examine traditions other than the Western, Christianity-based tradition.

Outside the Western canon, a non-marital or extramarital sexuality of the hero without deeper emotional entanglements is much more evident than in cinematic versions of Marvel and DC comics, where it is limited to just a few, morally dubious heroes such as in WATCHMEN (2009) or DEADPOOL (2016) or, at most, happens before the hero's reformation, as in IRONMAN. The motif of the lone wolf without emotional ties – present in LONE WOLF AND CUB (1972-1974) already in the title – is, however, quite frequent in manga and manga-based films, which would contradict the above assumption of a Christian influence on this motif. In my opinion, it is difficult to argue that the more libertine, albeit consensual, sexuality of these heroes is a consequence of a different religious context, i.e. of Shinto and Buddhism. If religion does play a role here, then in the sense that, unlike in the West, in Japan no single religious system has been solely dominant for two millennia, and none of the religious systems present was as strongly targeted at sexuality and the related pastoral power.

Rather, it could be argued that the gender-role structure of Japanese society, which in many respects has remained highly traditional to this day, provides the background for the divergent depiction of sexuality, as this system concedes correspondingly greater sexual freedom to males and, contrary to the West, lacks the 200 years tradition of the romantic male/female relationship as the ideal *locus* of sexuality.

Consequently, sexual violence as part of the standard repertoire of villains, both with respect to their own actions and in their acceptance of, or incitement to, sexual violence including gang rape, is not an emanation of a religious concept of evil, but simply a transposition of real-life male behaviour into fictional narratives. In any case, this sort of sexual violence is presented as "good" on neither side of the Pacific.

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Toufic El-Khoury

# The Problem of Evil in DC Universe Animated Movies, 2007–2016

## DC Multiverse, an Ironic Illustration of Leibniz's Theodicy?

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the question of evil and its metaphysical and moral implications in a series of animated movie adaptations of the DC Universe produced since 2006. The contemporary evolution of the medium, called the "Iron Age of comics", has seen the auto-reflexive nature of comics produce problems and themes related to the main question discussed in Christian theodicy: how can we perceive and define the possibility of evil in a world where God's omnipotence should have eliminated such a possibility? Moreover, why does evil seem to spread indefinitely in spite of all the efforts deployed by superheroes to stop evil? We will discuss the problem of evil as a natural narrative topic in light of comics' mythological and religious roots and with a particular study case: DC Comics Multiverse as an illustration of Leibniz's "best of all possible worlds" argument.

## BIOGRAPHY

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As the result of external or intra-generic influences, every movie genre organizes and matures in its aesthetics, its codes, and its thematic, triggering the curiosity of philosophy.[1] In the field of Film Studies, philosophers have recently

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1   We follow the definition of a movie genre suggested by Rick Altman and Raphaëlle Moine: the semantic-syntactic-pragmatic definition. The semantic elements are the narrative and visuals codes, the

become interested in movies, intrigued not only by selected authors or film aesthetics, but also by movie genres. Following the interest of Stanley Cavell in Hollywood comedy and melodrama, other philosophers have explored the codes and themes of established genres: Robert Pippin with film noir and the Western[2] and, in France, Eric Dufour with horror movies and science fiction.[3]

Movies and TV series adapted from comics and, more specifically, from the Superhero genre are starting to attract interest beyond the circle of critics and film historians.[4] The superhero movie is still at its beginning, whereas superhero comics have a longer and richer history, but with the release and success of SPIDER-MAN (Sam Raimi, US 2002) and the steady production of superhero movies since 2002, the superhero genre has taken form – before 2002, the rare hits were scattered and limited to the most iconic figures of the genre, Superman and Batman.[5] Even though the genre still has to prove its potential, through a philosophical and generic approach we can identify thematic links between these movies. Those topics will consolidate and appear more clearly when filmmakers and screenwriters free themselves of the simple fan's nostalgia for comics, for then they will be able to concentrate on the genre's mythical potential and its ability to address universal topics in a specific socio-cultural context.

In terms of the contemporary syntax of the superhero movie, one of the most relevant topics of the genre is the problem of evil. This focus is the most solid link between those movies and their mythological and religious roots. References to Christian theodicy and to political debates underline the authors' efforts, since the 1980s, to free the genre of its childish yoke, making possible diverse illustrations of our world's complex issues.

## THE IRON AGE, THE THIRD AGE OF SUPERHERO COMICS: AN AGE OF PESSIMISM?

In the history of superhero comics, three "ages" are usually delimited: the Golden Age, Silver Age, and Iron Age, the third one being the most discussed. Many

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genre's familiar "iconography". The syntactic elements are the "thematic undercurrent", topics and subjects linking a series of movies on a deeper level. The pragmatic aspect (suggested by Moine) refers to the public reception and the genre's acceptance in a specific socio-cultural context. The exact definition of a genre depends on a certain equilibrium and on the interaction of those different aspects in a particular historical period of production. See Altman, 1984, 6–18; Moine, 2008, 10–25.

2  See Pippin 2012; Pippin 2010.

3  See Dufour 2006; Dufour 2011.

4  We already have examples: White/Irwin /Arp 2008; Forest 2009.

5  In a book he edited in 2009, Claude Forest suggested the production of superhero movies was still too limited for him to write about the superhero movie as a movie genre (see Forest, 2009, 12–13). In 2016 that is no longer the case, as a result of the impressive commercial domination of those movies in U.S. and international markets, with film series like THE AVENGERS (Disney), BATMAN (Warner), and X-MEN (Fox).

exhaustive studies already exist on the subject.[6] Three tendencies in the evolution of the superhero genre since the 1940s stand out: a more realist approach in characterization, an internalization of the hero's conflict, and an exacerbated pessimism.

The heroes introduced during the Golden Age of comics (late 1930s to mid 1950s) were largely perfect and infallible. Most of the modern superheroes archetypes and prototypes were developed, but they remained monochromatic – the first versions of Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman, for example. In the Silver Age of comics (late 1950s to mid 1970s), the superheroes were depicted in a realistic way: often tormented, they had to face extraordinary challenges as well as daily and domestic problems. It was the age of Spiderman, the superhero in the midst of a teenage crisis, or the X-Men, who symbolically illustrated the anxieties of stigmatized minorities within a context of civic and social protest.

In a book on Marvel's universe – Marvel was DC Comics' main competitor – Anthony Mills, an American theologian, talks about a "turn to reality" in 1960s comics:[7] the characters became anchored in a concrete reality and were more recognizable, more "organic". This new "turn" distanced them from the values of the American monomyth, a contemporary adaptation in U.S. literature of a concept introduced by Joseph Campbell:[8] in comparison to the more individualistic, agnostic hero of the monomyth, the Silver Age hero was more dynamic, interactive, and interdependent. Mills is able to identify decidedly evangelical features in this new kind of hero.

But this period contained in embryonic form all the next period's excesses: while the Silver Age hero's conflicts were more internalized, creating more nuanced characters, the hero's "humanization" was replaced in the 1980s by existential crisis, with the hero calling into question his teleological ethics. From perfect hero to realist hero (undermined by his own demons), the superhero was finally confronting an imperfect and fallible world that underlined the vanity of his actions. In the wake of this new reality a new superhero appeared, with pronounced nihilistic tendencies – in a medium still criticized, strangely enough, for its childish naïveté.

How does this "revisionist" turn, which defines the Iron Age of comics, modify the genre's syntax? The conception of the main heroes has been completely modified, but above all, this new tendency emphasizes a meta-narrative dimension of the genre, allowing a meditation on the story and formal mechanisms of the medium and on its main syntactic elements. Like myth, the genre raises questions that lead to "labyrinths" (a term borrowed from Leibniz) in which

6   See Darowski 2016, 3–16.
7   Mills 2013, 97–98.
8   See Campbell 2013, 25–45.

reason has a tendency to go astray. Moreover, one of those questions, both central and universal and also intimately linked to the superhero genre's syntax, is the question of evil, of its origins and its production in today's world.

## DC COMICS UNIVERSE REVISITED IN ANIMATED MOVIES

The movies considered in this article are animated adaptations of DC Comics Universe, produced since 2006, with two, sometimes three movies per year. They are adapted from classics of the 1980s or hits from the 2000s – both decades belong to the Iron Age of comics. Those movies are short (around 75 minutes each), were made on a limited budget, and have a narrative fluidity and concentration that call to mind mythic narratives. More importantly, those movies are very dark: faithful to the modern comics' syntax, they often represent the end of a civilization or the world, and they mostly explore the shadowy side of every hero, not only of those, like Batman, whose dark side is the core element of their persona. Despite the format, the movie's length and the limited release (they are for the most part direct-to-video releases), or maybe *because* of those criteria, these movies often offer profiles of the superheroes that are more complex than those of the live-action blockbusters.

These animated adaptations primarily emphasize one of the main topics of comics' revisionist era: the sensitive question of evil's existence and production. Partly due to its mythic roots and narrative conventions, the superhero genre revolves around that question, confronting it, trivializing it, and deconstructing it. The excesses that often burden the genre, the over-dramatization of issues and story (maintaining a sometimes improbable balance between narrative obligations and spectacular imagery[9]), serve to stress the question as well as the ideological and philosophical contradictions of the revisionist period. The question that the superheroes henceforth ask (a question that drives them into doubt and despair and gives their hesitations an existential dimension) is the following: if we devote our lives and our superhuman powers to the good of humankind, how can humankind still be evil? Worse, why do the only palpable results of our efforts seem to be the expansion and constant renewal of evil?

American comics are strongly influenced by Christian theology. Though created by two Jewish authors (Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster), both children of European immigrants, who imagined Superman as an alien vainly longing for his lost homeland, the iconic superhero's "mythology" borrows heavily from the Gospel narrative, probably in response to the general public's cultural sensibilities. Movie adaptations by Bryan Singer (2006) and Zack Snyder (2013) clearly underline this aspect of the protagonist, representing the character as a saviour

9   See Pagello 2013, 5–6.

sent by his father to lead humanity to peace. But while Superman's story can be read in light of Christology, Iron Age comics are increasingly impregnated with Christian eschatology, more specifically with the futurist approach of Protestant eschatology that sees in the gospels of Matthew (24:15) and Luke (21:20), in the texts regarding the Great Tribulation, the foretelling of the end of the world.

In the genre's evolution during the last three decades, we can identify two main modifications to the medium's syntax: the loss of the Golden Age comics' lightness and naïve optimism, and the borrowing of science-fiction elements, and especially its dystopian features, with twentieth-century adult science fiction preferring a darker vision of humankind's future.[10] Those elements are recurrent during the Iron Age and can be identified in the major publications of the 1980s, all of which were adapted into movies in the 2000s: *Days of Future Past*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen*, and *V for Vendetta*.

When we consider the blockbusters of the last 15 years, and specifically the 25 biggest worldwide hits of each year, we notice that a growing proportion of those movies shows, in different ways, massive destruction, whether of a city, a country, a civilization, or even the whole world – between one and three films per year in the mid 2000s, eight in 2013 and 13 in 2014 (7 of those 13 movies were among the 10 biggest hits of the year). In dystopias, post-apocalyptic movies, disaster movies or Superhero film, images of massive and global destruction became not only the visual and narrative convention of a blockbuster, but also a promotional tool.

We do not yet have the hindsight that is necessary if we are to identify clearly the symptoms behind the recent apocalyptic imagery – that task awaits cultural studies in the future.[11] But it is noteworthy that popular cinema, usually a medium of escapism and comforting utopias, now targets the fundamental fears of the spectator. The "cinema of catastrophe" (in which we can place the genres referred to earlier) is today the most popular cinema worldwide.

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10  It seems natural that genre borrowing from science fiction would eventually produce a more pessimistic illustration of humanity's future. Science fiction itself rapidly grew beyond the utopian bursts of the nineteenth century and became increasingly associated with dystopia. The works of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne are good examples: both authors re-evaluated the optimism of their first novels and by the end of their literary careers were presenting a darker vision of the future. Superhero literature has a time delay when compared to science fiction. It inherited the lightness and optimism of science fiction at the moment the latter was losing these characteristics after the bombing of Hiroshima and during the Cold War. In the early 1980s, however, the same kind of disenchantment caught up with the superhero genre.

11  The literature representing the apocalypse, or any story reminiscent of the Gospel's Great Tribulation, never appears ex nihilo. Recently, Muriel Debié, a research director at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, launched a project on apocalyptic writings of the seventh and eighth centuries, focusing in particular on those of the Middle East region during the Muslim expansion. Every major turmoil in a society's social, political, and cultural fabric leads inevitably to the rise of an end-of-days literature.

The twentieth century saw destroyed every form of optimism inherited from the age of the Enlightenment: the two World Wars transformed Rousseau's human perfectibility into a pitiful utopia. German expressionism and American film noir were among the cinematic outcomes of this new existential pessimism. But even if it is impossible for us to know the reasons for the rise of the cinema of catastrophe, we can try to understand how that cinema suggests, in its own way, the deconstruction of philosophy's humanist certainties and relaunches necessary arguments related to the problem of evil. The cinema of catastrophe discusses evil, but not in the way the tale (a distant ancestor to the superhero genre) discusses evil, where the intention is to prepare the child for the dangers of adulthood. Freeing itself from the conventions of the tale, for better or for worse this cinema addresses the adult, drawing on diverse and complex means to discuss the issue of evil.

This last age of comics cannot be dissociated from Christian theodicy, whereby God's omniscience remains inseparable from his infinite kindness despite the presence of evil in the world. The existence of evil in a world where God's kindness is elevated to the status of absolute continues to haunt Christian thought and, by extension, American literature.

## THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AS THE CORE TOPIC OF THE SUPERHERO GENRE

The question of evil's existence, or being (or absence of being), is not fortuitous within a genre's narrative that works mainly in dichotomist terms and with radical oppositions, borrowing from ancient mythologies as well as Christian iconography. The conventional opposition in the superhero genre sees the birth of the hero naturally followed by the creation of his nemesis – an idea initially illustrated in SPIDERMAN (Sam Raimi, US 2002).[12] But DC animated movies also explore evil, its existence and the legitimacy of the hero's actions to put an end to it, in a more subtle manner, behind the veneer of dualist oppositions. The question of evil has political, moral, religious, psychological, and metaphysical implications, some of which are introduced here.

Evil is defined as the negation of good. Such negation is found in many confrontations in comics, the most iconic being the battle between Batman and the Joker. Evil is thought of as an absolute, a universal notion generating moral codes shared by many cultures – for example, the Sixth Commandment, which forbids the act of killing, draws a line some superheroes choose not to cross.

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12    The idea also appears in UNBREAKABLE (M. Night Shyamalan, US 2000). Shyamalan's movie anticipated the commercial domination of the superhero genre over the next decade, while developing, in an almost avant-garde way, a meta-filmic and critical approach to the genre's syntax. See Pagello 2013, 6–7.

Some movies contribute to the debate over the distinction between justice and vigilantism: the protagonist evolves in the margins of the law while pretending to serve it; interprets, transgresses, or judges it inefficient; and finally follows a more personal (and often ambiguous) ideal of justice. This process leads to a graduate deletion of the distinction between what René Girard calls private vengeance (based on vendetta codes) and public vengeance (a non-arbitrary application of the law).[13] The movies featuring Batman, adapted from 1980s classic comics, are often concerned with this topic: Batman: Under the Red Hood (Brandon Vietti, US 2010); Batman: Year One (Sam Liu/Lauren Montgomery, US 2011); The Dark Knight Returns (Jay Oliva, US 2012–2013).

Evil appears not only in Manichaean oppositions but also in confrontations of opposite points of views, linking to Hegel's definition of tragedy:[14] Justice League: The New Frontier (Dave Bullock, US 2008); Batman: Under the Red Hood (2010); Justice League: Doom (Lauren Montgomery, US 2012).

In other cases and especially in some recent interpretations of iconic characters (and in a way that contradicts the first point), evil appears in the actions of an individual engaged in a precise teleological process, the violent reform of a fallible world. As long as the objectives are noble, everything is allowed. The hero's actions are to be judged not in light of principles, but in the light of issues and circumstances. Evil here is thought of from a utilitarian angle, with one evil preventing another evil with more disastrous consequences. This cynical ascertainment of fallen characters can be found in Superman vs. the Elite (Michael Chang, US 2012), Batman: Under the Red Hood (2010) and Batman: The Dark Night Returns (2012–2013).[15]

Each category represents a possibly productive route for study as long as the genre evolves and matures – and there is still a substantial margin for improvement.[16] However, a first potentially interesting topic to explore from a moral and religious perspective, it seems to me, concerns the action's relevance: is

13  See Girard 2011.

14  In *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* and his *Aesthetic Courses*, Hegel talks, for example, of Sophocles' *Antigone*, a work of which he thinks highly, and of the opposition between Creon, the representative of human law, and Antigone, the defender of divine duty. As Mathieu Thibodeau summarizes, the tragic heroes are bound to "confront their compatriots, to assert their point of views, to promote their interests and to defend their own conception of the truth" (my translation). This situation leads them into unresolvable conflicts with others, bringing disaster and death. See Thibodeau 2011, 35.

15  Movies featuring Batman are frequently cited here due to the ambivalence created by a character who follows his own moral code but eventually expresses a certain faith in humankind. In Justice League: Doom (Lauren Montgomery, US 2012), a group of villains steals plans that had been elaborated by Batman in order for him to be able to neutralize, if the need arose, his own powerful allies (Superman and Wonder Woman, for example) should they lose their innocence by fully realizing the potential of their unlimited powers. The villains eventually deploy what Batman had considered a deterrent.

16  We can add to those different categories a debate related to a present political reality: the Cornelian dilemma involving individual liberty and security. See, for example, Marvel Comics' *Civil War*, which was recently adapted for the big screen. Some critics have already linked this question to Erich Fromm's thesis about "the Basic Human Dilemma" between unlimited freedom and security. See Langley 2016.

action good if it only generates chaos? This question seems to haunt modern superheroes, since their fight is endless. Despite their efforts and good will, their involvement in the world's affairs does not restore a lost equilibrium, but instead generates new distortions. Condemned by their chosen actions to a punishment worthy of Sisyphus, they multiply their efforts but appear to acknowledge, in the end, the vanity of those efforts. The frequent borrowings of dystopian elements during the Iron Age contribute to this growing feeling of fatalism, and of a sense that the modern hero is unable to change anything in the world from what it is condemned to be – or to become.[17]

This modern superhero inability places the superhero within a long tradition of anti-heroes, initiated by Don Quixote and prevalent in modern literature. Like Cervantes' hero, the superhero genre protagonists are helplessly willing to follow a given ideal or any recognizable paragon of moral rigour.

## DC COMICS' MULTIVERSE:
## AN IRONIC ILLUSTRATION OF LEIBNIZ'S THEODICY?

While Marvel sets up its own cosmogony with its layers and hierarchies, DC Comics prefers to create parallel worlds and timelines that can interact thanks to the ability of some protagonists (Flash, Lex Luthor) to travel from one world to another. The Multiverse, made up of an infinity of earths that serve as mirrors for one another, was introduced in the 1960s but elaborated in the 1980s. It allows the implementation of many versions of the worlds created by DC Comics, and above all of different versions of their iconic characters: DC authors rework and reinvent their origin stories and their profile, restart popular narrative arcs and erase less popular ones.[18] In addition to its obvious promotional potential, the Multiverse also enables new and diverse thematic ramifications.

In one of the DC Universe animated movies, this story arc is developed substantially. JUSTICE LEAGUE: CRISIS ON TWO EARTHS (Sam Liu/Lauren Montgomery, US 2010) centres on the conflict between the usual DC heroes, reunited in the Justice League (Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and Flash are all members), and their alter egos from another earth, who compose a group called the "crime syndicate" that spreads terror in the parallel world. In this alterna-

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17 In the 21st episode (of 23) of season four of ARROW (Greg Berlanti, US 2015–2016), an atomic missile launched by the season's villain explodes in an American town, causing the death of "tens of thousands". What could have been that season's high point, or the catastrophe the protagonists of the show tried to prevent for all 23 episodes, becomes the climax of a single episode, and the hero and his allies live it with a strange kind of resignation. The higher stakes of the next episode (the end of the world) might seem to explain the banality to which the event has been reduced, but perhaps the explanation lies in a sort of narrative laziness or, maybe worse, in the fact that in the contemporary superhero universe, an end-of-the-world narrative is not something a superhero tries to fight or avoid: the superhero must ultimately simply accept its inevitability. The superhero is not a shield against the dooming of the world, but just a "beacon of hope", as the protagonists say, in a doomed world.

18 See Pagello 2013, 2–3.

tive earth, all roles are inverted: Lex Luthor, usually Superman's nemesis, is the leader of the heroes, while Superman's alter ego is the villains' leader. Luthor is able to travel from one world to another and asks for the Justice League's help. The superheroes will travel to the parallel earth to put an end to the crime syndicate's reign of terror.

In this conventional plot, based on *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (2001) by Marv Wolfman and George Perez, one element stands out. Amongst all the super-heroes' monstrous doubles, Batman's alter ego, called Owlman, is the most intriguing character. He discovers the existence of infinite earths, and in particular that of "Earth-prime", the earth from which all other earths originate. After blackmailing the governments of his world with a weapon of mass destruction, he finally decides to use his weapon on Earth-prime, thus erasing all reality. When his mistress asks him why a man of reason (and, like Batman, he seems to be an extremely rational character) would do such a thing, he claims that the discovery of infinite parallel earths made him realize the vanity of his actions, with the actions of his doubles on other earths nullifying the *raison d'être* of his actions. He justifies his plan at length:

> Because it is the only action one could take that would have any purpose … Every decision we make is meaningless. Because somewhere, on a parallel earth, we have already made the opposite choice. We are nothing, absolutely nothing. [Here, we are rich, we are conquerors], and here we are poor, we are slaves, and here, our parents never met so we were never born. Here, the World ended in nuclear war, here, no fish was ever brave enough to crawl up on land and humans never evolved, and so on, ad infinitum[19].

In the character's mind, the decision to erase all reality means no other version of him will be able to make an alternative choice.

One scientific inspiration of DC's Multiverse could be the Everett Interpretation, or many-worlds interpretation, in quantum mechanics, formulated in the 1960s.[20] One can argue that this theory, extremely popular in the United States and reworked in many science-fiction subgenres (most obviously, perhaps, in Uchronia) was the direct influence on the development of the Multiverse narrative in DC Comics. The dynamics of evil, a core aspect of this narrative, is better underlined, however, by a philosophical questioning.

Indeed, the nihilistic assertion noted above by a character confronted with the painful discovery of infinite earths and his subsequent action articulate two

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19   Justice League: Crisis on Two Earths (Sam Liu/Lauren Montgomery, US 2010).

20   Many-worlds interpretation, initially suggested by Hugh Everett, stipulates in short that all alternate worlds and futures are "real" and that every world that could have been possible because of alternate choices or events in the past actually occurred in other worlds considered alternate realities. This theory is illustrated by the Schrödinger's cat theorem.

aspects of the problem of evil, also discussed by Christian theology: moral evil (the inability of humans to free themselves from sin, a constituent part of their nature) and metaphysical evil (is evil a part of God's creation?). Those two aspects, frequently illustrated in American comics, are tightly linked in many animated adaptations of the DC Universe, whose generic syntax they refine.

Concerning moral evil, the first aspect, we find a general feeling of fatalism evident in comics and their adaptations, and notably in the DC Comics–adapted story arcs. This feeling links the modern superhero to anti-heroic figures popular in classical genres such as film noir of the 1940s: anti-heroes are aware of the inevitable failure of their actions, but are also unable to act in any other way. Robert Pippin, a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago, raises the issue of agency in a series of classic films noirs, asking, "What could action and agency at all look like where there is almost no credible sense of any 'space of possibility' left; when the suspicion is that the very idea of someone running the show, leading his or her life, begins to look naïve or self-deceived?"[21]

In the contemporary superhero genre, this question is picked up in the protagonists' seeing their area of action and influence gradually reduced, which is tragic considering that their archetype is defined by altruistic intentions. With a character like Owlman, the monstrous double of a superhero with an already dominant shadow side, this discovery only leads to a radical re-evaluation of free will, and by extension of humanity.

Concerning metaphysical evil, the second aspect, DC Comics' Multiverse reminds us of the central argument of Gottfried Leibniz's *Theodicy*, and the assertion that our world is "the best of all potential worlds". At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Leibniz, a German philosopher and mathematician, participated in a theological debate related to the co-existence of evil and God in a world created by the latter. Like many theologians of his time, Leibnitz was eager to resolve the question of the existence of moral evil (sins, injustices) and physical evil (sufferings) in a world created by an omnipotent God, but he faced a problematic contradiction in the New Testament's having elevated the attributes of good and love in God to absolutes.[22] To the question of why God allows evil in a world God had the power to create perfect, Leibniz maintained that the existence of evil is necessary, evil being the criteria by which good acts are evaluated. Functioning like the weight on a scale, it allows the positive of humanity to be gauged. God must have assessed the different possible combi-

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21  Pippin 2012, 10–11.

22  Even if theodicy as the "justification of God" already existed in Greek and Latin philosophy, it was with the rise of monotheistic religions, and the defence of an all-powerful and omnibenevolent God that this question became more and more pressing for dogmatic thought.

nations and would have chosen the best possible combination, with the optimal complementarity of good and evil.[23]

This idea is illustrated in the DC Universe in a way that is faithful to Leibniz's imagery. Parallel worlds offer nightmarish versions of the initial world and imagine what could have been the fate of the famous superheroes had the circumstances of their initiation been different. Those stories work on the dark side of each character, acknowledging the extent of the character's powers and the nature of the character's demons.[24]

On another level, however, this universe seems to offer a parody of Leibniz's metaphysics. Superheroes can be seen as extremely humane (since the turn to reality of the 1960s, their weaknesses have underlined their humanity) or as pathetic representations of divinities. Superhero stories may initially have been conceived as modern adaptations of Greek and Nordic theogonies, but the influence of the characters on their environment was gradually reduced in the contemporary age of comics. Hence, despite their powers they are unable to achieve a purpose (counter evil deeds) with just their good intentions or, worse, without the use of questionable means – and one of Leibniz's critiques echoes here: isn't an omniscient, omnipotent God by definition supposed to be able to achieve the goal of a better world without having to resort to evil?[25]

Even if theodicy seemed to lose its impact after the nineteenth century, the shockwaves and existential crisis generated by the Second World War, the Holocaust, and Hiroshima in the second half of the twentieth century renewed interest in theodicy's central questions. Two texts published in the 1980s shed light on this renewal: Hans Jonas' *The Concept of God after Auschwitz*, published in 1984, and a conference paper given by Paul Ricœur at the University of Lausanne in 1985, "Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology"[26]. Hans Jonas, a German philosopher, student of Husserl and Heidegger and friend of Hannah Arendt, was deeply affected by society's sudden decline into extreme violence during the 1930s and 1940s and became obsessed with human civilization's finitude.[27] In his 1984 essay, he re-evaluated the pertinence of theodicy's arguments for the contemporary world. One new question arose: how can we still

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23  See Leibniz 1969.

24  Following Leibniz's assertions, many philosophers of the seventeenth century discussed the central issues of theodicy, among them Emmanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel (in chapter six of The Phenomenology of the Spirit). Kant's study of Job, found in an essay of 1791 entitled *On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy,* constituted a first attempt to revise the theories on which theodicy is constructed. Against theodicy he raised the idea of anthropodicy (justification of humankind as good). In the dialectic chapters of *Critique of Pure Reason*, theodicy falls under what he designates "transcendental illusion". He does not exclude the question of evil from philosophical discourse, but places it in the "practical" sphere, as something that must not be and that action fights. Therefore, the main concern is not where evil comes from, but why we commit it. See Ricœur 1985, 41–42.

25  See Franklin 2003, 97–101.

26  This keynotewas also previously given at the American Academy of Religion, in 1984.

27  A subject also discussed by Hannah Arendt in *Qu'est-ce que la Politique?* (1955–1958).

accept the idea of an omnipotent God after Auschwitz? This contextualized reconsidering of theodicy's basic questions had become necessary for Jonas, who, as a Christian, rarely questioned the existence of God but did try to understand God's apparent laisser-faire. In this context, we must start by abandoning the idea of an omnipotent God, for human reason cannot accept that a being capable of stopping the horror of Auschwitz did not do so. However, Jonas's argumentation is interesting in that he tried to explain the paradox of a powerless God by proposing a personal interpretation, we could say even a rewriting, of the creation myth as, "In the beginning, God, in an unfathomable choice, decided to indulge in chance, risk and in the infinite diversity of fate".[28] Then God trembles because, carried by his own impulsion, "the shock of evolution crosses the threshold at which innocence ceases, and new criteria of success or failure appear".[29] Jonas separates the ideas of goodness and omnipotence in God, who abandoned the latter at the world's creation.

Jonas' efforts to rethink theodicy by relying on myth's codes have their charm but also their limitations. In the beginning of his essay mentioned above, Ricœur expanded on how myth incorporates a fragmentary experience of evil into origin stories with cosmic dimensions, offering initial explanation of the existence of evil. However, myths do not avoid paradoxes and ambiguities while trying to explain the origins of evil: they constitute a partial response, with consolatory effect, to the questions of where evil comes from, why, and for how long. Myth answers the "why" question, but fails to find a response to "why me?" Metaphysics and then moral philosophy take over.[30]

Ricœur then reviews how Leibniz's *Theodicy* places under the same concept, and the same source, disparate terms such as sin (a moral evil seen in the responsible agent that inflicts pain), suffering (seen from the perspective of the victim who receives pain), and death. Ricœur rethinks evil, in light of Kant's reassertions, in its "relational-dialogical structure",[31] with evil inflicted by one echoing in the evil suffered by the other. The synthesis he offers of the many aspects of theodicy reminds us of the need to confront the problem of evil even when God is no longer at the centre of philosophical systems.

In the third act of JUSTICE LEAGUE: CRISIS ON TWO EARTHS (2010), and while setting his diabolical plan in motion, the Owlman character seems to point a finger at the human's free will, another controversial subject discussed by Leibniz. Having teleported himself onto Earth-prime but before he activates his bomb in order to erase every form of existence, he is confronted by Batman, his alter

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28   Jonas 1994, 14 (my translation).
29   Ibid., 20 (my translation).
30   Ricoeur 2010, 27–28.
31   Ibid., 24.

ego, who has followed him in order to stop him. Owlman explains to his nemesis, and double, the nature of Earth-prime, where they now find themselves:

> Before there was thought, there was this place, one Earth with a single History. But with the coming of Man came the illusion of free will, and with that illusion came chaos. With every choice we make, we literally create a World. History branches in two, creating one earth where we made the choice, and a second where we did not. That is the secret of the Universe. Billions of people, making billions of choices, creating infinite earths. Some so similar to each other you could spend a lifetime searching for any distinction, other so radically different they defy comprehension. … The source of the cataclysm was the same as it always is: Man[32]

The character's explanation of the Multiverse's functions reminds us of the place of free will in Leibniz's system. Emile Bréhier, a French historian of philosophy, summarizes this system as follows:

> In this system where only individual substances exist, where everything arises from their spontaneity, nothing is considered that is not linked to the whole universe; those substances are already universes and there is nothing they do not include, at least virtually: each of these substances, that seems to include everything, is in fact defined by its relation to all the others, and by a fixed place in a hierarchy that comprises doomed beings as well as angels and chosen ones."[33]

In a way, Owlman's assertion is rather Leibnizian, since it afflicts humankind with all the evils of the universe. In his theodicy project, where the initial idea was that evil had corrupted the relations between God and humankind, Leibniz found himself in a quandary as he sought to justify God's actions, for he was unable to exonerate one without holding the other guilty, "oscillating between the temptation of forgiving himself by accusing God, and pardoning God by accusing himself".[34]

Like Leibniz, the Owlman character locates evil solely in human action and responsibility. But unlike for the philosopher, for the Owlman every possibility of optimism or empathy is then erased, for humankind and humankind's free will are a cancer from which the world must be delivered, even if to do so means the destruction of the world and of himself – for, by his own admission, he himself is as imperfect as all the others. A physical and verbal confrontation ensues, dur-

32   Justice League: Crisis on Two Earths (Sam Liu/Lauren Montgomery, US 2010).

33   "Dans ce système où seules existent des substances individuelles, où tout découle de leur spontanéité, il n'est pas fait la moindre part à rien qui ne soit fonction de l'univers tout entier, c'est que ces substances sont déjà des univers et qu'il n'est rien qu'elles ne contiennent au moins virtuellement : chacune de ces substances, qui paraît être tout dedans, n'est en réalité définie que par ses rapports avec toutes les autres, et par une place fixe dans une hiérarchie qui comporte des damnés aussi bien que des anges et des élus" (Bréhier, 1994, 306. My translation).

34   Brunschwig 1969, 9–10 (my translation).

ing which Batman, whose faith in humanity is also ambivalent, blocks the plans of his nihilistic alter ego before giving this strange reply, inspired by Nietzsche, a philosopher much referred to in popular culture: "We both looked into the abyss. But when the abyss looked back, you blinked[35]."

This curious reference to the famous aphorism 146 of *Beyond Good and Evil* raises a question: Did the Batman character, this creature of the night, perfectly understand the essence of evil, which allowed him not to surrender to it blindly? The mistake committed by the Owlman character, the act of blinking, calls to mind the prophets – Saint Paul, for example,– who were blinded and covered their eyes when confronted with a divine vision. The suggestion for Batman is of a total surrender to the forces of the abyss – identified as a divine power – and the obliteration of any trace of free will, a disease that, according to the Owlman's initial observation, gives only an illusion of freedom.[36]

The Leibnizian solution was never convincing. During the eighteenth century, and even before Voltaire's caricature of Leibniz in Pangloss in *Candide*, David Hume suggested that the world had been created by a novice god, in a half-accomplished first attempt. On the same note, and in the context of the twentieth century's pessimism and metaphysical scepticism, the existence of parallel worlds in the DC Universe can only lead to an inversion of Leibniz's plea. Yet does recognizing Leibniz's argument nullify those heroic figures' *raison d'être* and necessity? If this world is the best of all possible worlds, why bother with superheroes? These protagonists are stuck in an infinite vicious circle, where their heroic actions (fighting against the forces of evil) are incompatible with their identity (forces of evil define them as heroic protagonists). But, in a paradoxical manner, it is less a question of compatibility than of complementarity, with the hero's actions stimulated by antagonistic forces, indefinitely generating new actions.

## CONCLUSION

The question of evil, and its endless ramifications, enables the semantic elements and syntax of the superhero genre to mature and be renewed. Some of the more obvious signs of syntactic renewal are the efforts of the superhero genre to raise awareness, through its own means, of contemporary socio-political issues. It also addresses an audience that is no longer limited to teenagers,

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35 Justice League: Crisis on Two Earths (Sam Liu/Lauren Montgomery, US 2010).

36 The choice of an owl as the symbol of Batman's diabolical alter ego is interesting. Both owl and bat are creatures of the night, but in many cultures the owl symbolizes loneliness, melancholy, and forces of darkness, unlike the bat, whose representations suggest a more dualist symbolism: though seen as a failed bird, or a monstrous being whose spiritual evolution was interrupted, in Greek mythology the bat refers to an intermediary state of progress, of maturation. See Chevalier/Gheerbrant 1982, 252–254.

with more adults interested in comics and their adaptations. In addition, the influence of dystopian literature on the development of the superhero genre has become more palpable over the years.

This renewal is thought unfortunate by observers who consider the genre's loss of innocence and its desire to be taken seriously a step backwards, deeming that its authors are ignoring the silliness that is integral to the genre – and where is the pleasure when a genre tries to be serious when it is not supposed to be? In addition, over the last thirty years, although the study of comics has gained a certain cultural legitimation, some researchers, especially in Europe, still find it difficult to see analysis of the comic as a cultural practice worthy of theoretical approaches and academic emancipation as are cinema and television.[37]

Furthermore, the close relationship between academic research and fandom, a characteristic feature of the study of comics in the United States, is not always well received by mainstream academics.[38] The extreme popularity of the media and its heavy reliance on the fans' imperatives and needs seem to undermine its hopes for cultural legitimacy. However, the renewal of the genre, especially via film, another popular medium, is a positive sign for those who can identify the superhero genre's ability to build a political and philosophical discourse that is in line with today's angst.

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37  There are some notable exceptions in the French-speaking academic world, such as the studies of Hergé's *Les aventures de Tintin*, a cultural phenomenon in its own right.

38  See Baetens 2005, 4–5.

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Simon Philipp Born

# Shadows of the Bat

## Constructions of Good and Evil in the Batman Movies of Tim Burton and Christopher Nolan

## ABSTRACT

The superhero narrative is typically premised on the conflict between the hero and the villain, the mythical struggle between good and evil. It therefore promotes a Manichaean worldview where good and evil are clearly distinguishable quantities. This bipolar model is questioned in the Batman movies of Tim Burton and Christopher Nolan. Since his creation in 1939, Batman has blurred the line between black and white unlike any other classic comic book superhero. As a "floating signifier", he symbolizes the permeability of boundaries, for his liminal character inhabits a world between light and darkness, order and anarchy, hero and villain. Drawing on the complex ambiguity of the character, Tim Burton and Christopher Nolan deconstruct the traditional dichotomy of good and evil in the superhero narrative by reversing its polarity and emphasizing the fictionality of it all. Although they differ in style and method, both filmmakers invite us to overcome the Manichaean belief in favor of a more ambivalent and sophisticated viewpoint.

## KEYWORDS

Batman, good and evil, Manichaeism, duality, superhero, mythology, theatricality

## BIOGRAPHY

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Fig. 1: Lives primarily in a world of darkness and shadows: Batman, Gotham City's iconic superhero. Film still, Batman (Tim Burton, US 1989), 01:57:21.

Joker [to Batman]: *I think you and I are destined to do this forever.*[1]

The 21st century is proving to be the Golden Age of superhero movies. Comic book stories about superhuman beings fighting evil, which have circulated in popular culture since the 1930s, are now being recognized and consumed by an even broader audience. The omnipresence of the superhero transforms him from pop-cultural icon into modern-day myth. Drawing on Joseph Campbell's works, David Reynolds remarks that modern myths like the superhero narratives are not confined to religious ideologies, but rather "develop from ethical perspectives as they relate to a political and economic world".[2] Indeed, their stories about heroism, justice, virtue and villainy not only entertain us, but also function as a moral educator, reinforcing Western values and mediating norms of social behavior: "Superhero stories bill themselves as tales of courage and friendship, representing American ideals at their best while attempting to pass on a strong moral code to the impressionable children who read comic books, play superhero video games, and watch superhero films."[3] In order to explain these stories' widespread popularity, scholars like Richard J. Gray and Betty Kaklamanidou have argued that superhero narratives respond to the general longing for "true heroism" and a clear distinction between right and wrong in an uncertain and morally ambiguous globalized world: "Superhero films pro-

1   The Dark Knight (2008), 02:08:31–02:08:35.
2   Reynolds 2011.
3   DiPaolo 2011, 5.

mote the ideas of peace, safety and freedom and seek to restore the planet to a nostalgic harmony."[4]

To promote these ideals, the superhero narrative is typically premised on the conflict between hero and villain, the mythical struggle between good and evil. In the superhero genre, good and evil mainly fulfill narrative functions. The struggle between hero and villain produces suspense and drives the plot, where, ironically, the roles of protagonist and antagonist are switched: the villain, and not the hero, plays the active part, as his evil actions initiate the story and call upon the hero to act. According to Richard Reynolds, "The common outcome, as far as the structure of the plot is concerned, is that the villains are concerned with change and the heroes with the maintenance of the status quo."[5] The evil antagonist is a necessary counterforce who challenges the protagonist and allows him to be good. The rise and fall of the villain is a socially required evaluation that crime does not pay, while the certain triumph of the hero reminds the audience of the superiority of the values he represents. As far as the narrative structure of the superhero story and the ideology it conveys are concerned, good and evil are mutually dependent, one cannot exist without the other. The threat from the villain forces the hero to act, his malignity enabling the hero to show off his goodness. Superhero mythologies therefore seem to promote a Manichaean worldview. Recalling the dualistic cosmology of the late-antique prophet Mani, life is conceived as a constant struggle between two external forces – the spiritual realm of light and the material realm of darkness. In a ying-and-yang balance of opposites, the existence of one is defined through the existence of the other.

This bipolar explanation of the world is questioned by the more ambivalent take of contemporary superhero films, as Johannes Schlegel and Frank Habermann remark. Postmodern films like Unbreakable (M. Night Shyamalan, US 2000) or Hellboy (Guillermo del Toro, US 2004) display in their "metanarrative"[6] deep distrust of the absolute distinction between good and evil, which they expose as constructions rather than natural quantities: "the dichotomy of good and evil in contemporary superhero films is first and foremost negotiated, performatively generated and constantly debated, rendering it an unstable phenomenon of produced *and* ascribed meaning that has to be reaffirmed perpetually".[7] This essay argues that good and evil are socially constructed categories that regulate the world and explain human behavior. Their order-obtaining duality is culturally mediated in narratives and visual texts such as superhero stories. Ultimately, some of these texts not only reflect but also

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4    Gray II/Kaklamanidou 2011, 3.
5    Reynolds 1992, 51.
6    Lyotard 1997, xxiv–xxv.
7    Schlegel/Habermann 2011, 31.

disclose and willingly subvert the clear-cut dichotomy in favor of a more complex and sophisticated viewpoint, as is the case with the Batman movies of Tim Burton and Christopher Nolan. Their visions of the Caped Crusader are unique, yet not completely out of line with the character. Instead, they ingeniously condense Batman's conflicting history into a multi-layered psychologization. In his many incarnations, Batman blurs the line between black and white, and unlike any other classic comic book superhero he constructs a world of multitudinous grey. Long before the postmodern hero deconstructions found in graphic novels like Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (US 1986–87), he had already been conceived in his original draft as an alteration and revision to the superhero myth. The Dark Knight is driven by his dual nature. In order to defend the light, he utilizes his darkness to fight evil (see fig. 1). Additionally, his fragmented textual existence self-consciously reflects his symbolic nature, unveiling the fictionality and theatricality of his character.



Fig. 2: Mise-en-abyme: although battling the Joker in the final showdown of film, Batman still finds the time to pose with his Bat-plane in front of the moon, displaying the Bat logo as his intradiegetic and extradiegetic brand. Film still, Batman (Tim Burton, US 1989), 01:39:16.

## THE FLOATING SIGNIFIER

Since his debut in issue 27 of *Detective Comics*, from May 1939, Batman has become one of the most popular and most iconic comic book superheroes of all time, spawning a gigantic media franchise that includes major blockbuster films, TV shows, video games, direct-to-video animations, comic books, novels and a massive range of licensed merchandise. All these simultaneously existing

Batmen challenge our traditional notion of a fictional character as coherent, semantic figure. Who is the "real" Batman? The original comic book vigilante from the 1940s, Adam West's colorful "Camped Crusader" from the infamous Batman TV show (ABC, US 1966–1968), the dark and gritty incarnation of the 1980s, Christian Bale's post–9/11 Dark Knight or even the Lego Batman? The answer is that he is all of them. Batman is the sum of all his iterations, a hypertext that connects conflicting identities, media texts and storyworlds in an interacting matrix. According to Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio, Batman is a "floating signifier", not defined by any sort of author, medium, time period or primary text, but held together by a small number of essential character traits such as his iconographically specific costume, his secret identity as billionaire Bruce Wayne, the murder of his parents, his setting (Gotham City) and a recurring cast of friends and foes.[8] For Will Brooker, even these core components can be reduced to one essential element as the minimal marker for a Batman story – the Bat logo, Batman's symbol of his crime-fighting idea, which also functions as his unique brand both inside and outside the narrative (see fig. 2).[9]

Similarly to Brooker, Paul Levitz ponders the idea that Batman's protean nature is "built on a purely visual icon, which has proved to be remarkably reinterpretable".[10] He refers to the fact that Batman's character originated as loose sketch of a bat-man figure inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's drawings of a flying machine. When comic artist Bob Kane and author Bill Finger introduced the Caped Crusader in 1939, he was conceived as a quick-fire response that would capture the huge success of Superman, who had debuted just a year before. His character was not yet fully drawn, as demonstrated by the fact that his defining origin story was only told six months later. Kane and Finger combined various tropes and figures of popular culture of the 1930s present in movies, pulp fiction, comic strips and newspaper headlines and formed them into one,[11] but Batman is primarily influenced by the detective stories of his time, like most of the comic book superheroes. Drawing on their roots in crime and mystery fiction, detective stories also contain a Manichaean philosophy. According to Marcel Danesi, they transfer the medieval struggle between angels and demons into the secular contexts of investigators and perpetrators: "The detective story is, in a sense, a modern-day morality play. Evil must be exposed and conquered. In the medieval period the evil monster or demon was vanquished by spiritual forces, such as Goodness; today, he is vanquished by a detective or a superhero crime fighter."[12] Batman varies the tradition of the detective story, as he is both

8    Uricchio/Pearson 1991, 186.
9    Brooker 2012, 79–83.
10   Levitz 2015, 15.
11   Boichel 1991, 6.
12   Danesi 2016, 19.

angel and demon in one person. In terms of mythology, he combines two major mythical archetypes, namely the Hero and the Shadow.[13]

Batman is a superhero, but a very human one. He has no special powers; he was not born on an alien planet and bitten by a radioactive insect. He relies purely on his limitless resources: a multi-billion dollar heritage, outstanding combat skills, an inventive mind and, of course, his qualities as "world's greatest detective", which relate him to other famous crime-solving characters from literature like Sherlock Holmes or pulp hero Doc Savage. Batman accords perfectly with Joseph Campbell's famous definition of the hero as "someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself".[14] Batman is not driven, however, by a noble impulse to altruism like Superman, but rather by the experience of loss and a need for vengeance.[15] Having been unable to prevent the murder of his parents, he finds the only way to halt injustice is through his second life, as masked vigilante. But even when as new and empowered Caped Crusader he becomes painfully aware of the limits of his might, he cannot prevent either himself or those entrusted to him from getting hurt. In his masquerade, Batman does not overcome his trauma, but instead relives it anew night by night. There is an inherent darkness to the character and his setting. Newer comic books like Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) psychologize Batman as broken justice fanatic, a dark reflection of the bright Superman, the American Dream degenerated into a nightmare. He shares similarities with the Jungian archetype of the Shadow, the presentation of the psyche's dark, hidden side, which is not necessarily evil, but rather everything the self wants to conceal and keep out of the light.[16] Batman is not a savior, but an avenger. A creature of the night, a mystery figure dressed in black who employs his darkness to mercilessly fight crime like his pulp predecessor the Shadow. His blackness condenses in the image of a bat, a central symbol in the American Gothic tradition of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that conjured up "images of darkness, terror, animal savagery, and soul-sapping vampirism, all of which were often linked to notions of ethnic infiltration".[17] Like the infamous title character of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Batman operates in the shadows, flies through the night and radiates an intriguing aura of awe and terror. Bela Lugosi's iconic portrayal of the prince of darkness in Tod Browning's Dracula (US 1931) may even have inspired Batman's cape – just as the mystery film The Bat Whispers (Roland West, US 1930), where a masked murderer named "The Bat" terrorizes America's upper class, features a prototype of the Bat logo.

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13 See Vogler 2007, 23–80.
14 Campbell/Moyers 1988, 151.
15 Regalado 2015, 120.
16 Langley 2012, 170–171.
17 Regalado 2015, 122.

In conclusion, Batman's character has origins not only in heroic figures like Sherlock Holmes, but also in famous incarnations of evil like Dracula. This vital duality is also evident in Batman's relationship with his enemies, who function as his doppelgangers: "Understanding Batman requires us to look hardest at him and his foes. The villains mirror and warp his darkness, his fears, his needs for puzzles to solve and criminals to hurt, and his hopes too."[18] Batman's antagonists play a part for the narrative that is as important as the part played by the protagonist himself. Just as the Dark Knight is not solely good, his opponents are not solely evil. Batman's rogues' gallery unfolds as a panorama of tragic existences that were shattered by reality. In a dystopian hell like Gotham City, "all it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy", as the Joker explains in Alan Moore's graphic novel *The Killing Joke* (1988).[19] The comic also raises the question whether Gotham's villains created Batman as their own nemesis, or if the self-appointed avenger attracted these troubled spirits by his presence, thus being himself responsible for their making. "I made you, you made me first", Batman growls at his eternal adversary, the Joker, at the end of BATMAN (1989).[20] "You complete me" is the clown's answer 19 years later in THE DARK KNIGHT (Christopher Nolan, US 2008).[21] Batman and his villains are "locked into a ritualized dance" with each other (see fig. 3), justifying each other's exist-



Fig. 3: In BATMAN (1989), Bruce Wayne (Michael Keaton) and the Joker (Jack Nicholson) are visualized as reflecting doppelgangers. Film still, BATMAN (Tim Burton, US 1989), 00:47:50.

18   Langley 2012, 268.
19   Moore 2008, 42.
20   BATMAN (1989), 01:50:50–01:50:52.
21   THE DARK KNIGHT (2008), 01:24:32–01:24:34.

ence.[22] Both sides adopt costumed identities in attempts to make sense of life.[23] The carnivalesque world of Batman is a stage where the Manichean struggle between good and evil is nothing but a role-play acted out by the Dark Knight and his foes.

This celebration of theatricality where the mask is of the utmost importance can be seen most notably in the movie adaptations of Tim Burton and Christopher Nolan. With the examples of BATMAN RETURNS (1992) and THE DARK KNIGHT (2008), I shall demonstrate that Burton and Nolan can be seen as opposing poles on the same scale. Both are heavily influenced by film noir, but while Burton experiments with the fantastic-melodramatic component of the epochal film style on the edge to expressive gothic horror, Nolan courts a contemporary update in the tradition of the *neo noir*. Above all, BATMAN RETURNS (1992) and THE DARK KNIGHT (2008) deconstruct the dichotomy of good and evil in the superhero narrative by reversing its polarity and emphasizing the artificiality of it all.

## BATMAN RETURNS OR THE INSURRECTION OF SIGNS

Christmas in Gotham City – a never-ending nightmare. Flanked by two absurdly large muscular statues, a gigantic Christmas tree lights the overcrowded Gotham Plaza. An allegory of power. The Christmas tree sits between the sign codes of fascist architecture as a central image of mass slavery, the tyranny of department stores and advertised dreams. The city is run by tycoon Max Shreck (Christopher Walken), whose very name hints at his bloodsucking nature – actor Max Schreck played the title character of the silent horror film NOSFERATU, EINE SYMPHONIE DES GRAUENS (NOSFERATU – A SYMPHONY OF HORROR, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, DE 1922). The ubiquitous symbol of Shreck's store empire is the face of a grinning cartoon cat reminiscent of Felix the Cat. Through the image of a powerful corporation hiding behind the friendly face of a cartoon animal, Burton processes his time as a subordinate at The Walt Disney Compnay, which has always dominated the American popular culture with its many images, conservative ideologies and merchandise products. Suddenly, a big present box arrives at the Plaza and unleashes a cascade of maniac circus clowns with machine guns. The scenery descends into chaos as bikers with enormous skulls trash hot-dog stands, a devilish fire breather incinerates teddy bears and a maniac ringleader shoots the Christmas tree to pieces with his barrel-organ Gatling gun. An insurrection of signs, released by the bizarre Penguin (Danny DeVito) who lives in Gotham's sewers. Flushed away as a deformed baby of rich parents on Christmas Eve twenty years ago, Penguin takes revenge on the afflu-

22   Brooker 2012, 138.
23   Coogan 2006, 105.

Figs. 4–5: The view of the outcast: the Penguin watches the Christmas charade on Gotham Plaza (fig. 4) from his underground world and executes his revenge on the society that expelled him on Christmas Eve as a child (fig. 5). Film stills, Batman Returns (Tim Burton, US 1992), 00:11:04, 01:34:51.



ent consumer society that rejected him as a monster (see fig. 4–5). He kidnaps Shreck and blackmails him into assisting his ascent into the world above, recycling Shreck's dirty secrets that have washed up in his underground kingdom and using them against him. From toxic waste to body parts – the by-products of a ruthless capitalism.

Society creates its own demons. Even the whip-wielding Catwoman is a product of a sexist macho society that keeps its women small as tamed pussycats. And, if an unruly female does not obey the male order, she is pushed out of the window, as happens to secretary Selina Kyle (Michelle Pfeiffer), who is killed by her boss, Max Shreck, for her curiosity (see fig. 6). Down in the gutter, however, Selina is resurrected with the help of wild stray cats. The tables are turned: from being a helpless mouse that had to be rescued by Batman from bad guys in an earlier



Figs. 6–7: After the punishment for her uprising against the male order (fig. 6), Selina Kyle returns as Catwoman (fig. 7) to rebel against the patriarchal semiotic system. Film stills, Batman Returns (Tim Burton, US 1992), 00:27:07 (fig. 6), 00:53:40 (fig. 7).

scene, Selina transforms into a black beast and now has claws of her own: "I am Catwoman. Hear me roar!"[24] For her empowerment against a chauvinistic business world she adapts the symbol of her oppression – the cat – and reframes it (see fig. 7). The grinning cat turns into a furious panther that lives out its sexual autonomy in its animalistic ferocity in the spirit of Jacques Tourneur's CAT PEOPLE (US 1942).[25] Selina destroys her stuffy apartment, which is filled with the slavish insignia of her old life, and tailors the skin of her new identity – a skintight, black-leather outfit whose seams remain all too visible. The emphasis on the fragmented self refers to the construction and performance of gender roles; as a pop-cultural condensation of post-feminist theories, Catwoman reveals the correlation between sexuality, power and identity. Her rebellion against masculine rule is doomed to failure, however, as Catwoman is killed again and again throughout the movie by every male protagonist. Even though she exposes on the screen the uneven power relationship between men and women, she cannot change it. Located between the poles of fetishized male fantasy and a feminist avenger model, Selina's self-search reaches an impasse. Objectified by the male's gaze, her riot is smashed by Hollywood's patriarchal semiotic system.[26]

While the Penguin and Catwoman reign over Gotham's streets with terror, another beast man is fielded to restore the order: Batman (Michael Keaton). Batman, too, has been maimed by the outside world and left with emotional scars, but his revenge is directed not at the causes of his pain, but at its symptoms – the criminals. He fights the freaks and monsters of the town, with whom he has ore in common than with the sane citizens he swore to protect. Burton draws the disrupted psyche of the Dark Knight as a hopeless case of a traumatized individual who has lost his own identity within the whole superhero masquerade. Batman is no longer the mask of Bruce Wayne; Bruce Wayne is the mask of Batman. Burton's Batman is a deeply introverted character, trapped within his inner trauma. He puts on the mask of the monstrous in order to shield himself from the outside world. He does not even flinch from killing, but takes lives with a casualness and malice that make you shudder. First he scorches the fire breather with his Batmobile, then he slips a strong thug a bomb and sends him to hell with a diabolical smile. Is Batman a gruesome sadist? There is a revealing shot in Burton's first Batman movie where the protagonist looks down from the roof of the Axis Chemicals factory, with "Axis" in big letters shining above his dark figure (see fig. 8, next page). While Batman fought bravely against the Axis powers in a propagandistic movie serial from 1943, he now seems to adapt their relentless methods to control Gotham City as in a fascist

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24   BATMAN RETURNS (1992), 00:42:13–00:42:17. The line is an obvious reference to Helen Reddy's hymn of the women's right movement from 1972: "I am woman. Hear me roar!" See Heger 2010, 200.

25   See Doty/Ingham 2004.

26   See Mulvey 1999.

Fig. 8: Batman watches over Gotham City using questionable means. Film still, BATMAN (Tim Burton, US 1989), 00:28:54.

surveillance state.[27] This sinister interpretation does not move far from Frank Miller's version of the Dark Knight.

"I guess I am tired of wearing masks."[28] In BATMAN RETURNS (1992), good and evil appear not as fixed, moral quantities, but as narrative constructs whose compositions are freely variable. They are attributions, masks, in which one appears before others and which others attach to one. They mean protection (Batman), but also freedom (Catwoman). The perpetual role-play goes on until the mask becomes the skin and the skin a mask. After a short liaison, Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle meet again at a masquerade ball, no disguises needed. In a dance of mask and identity, they recognize each other's second face by means of a line of dialogue they had shared as their alter egos (see fig. 9–10, r.). They see the mask behind the face and ask, "Does this mean we have to start fighting?"[29] The advanced schizophrenia of their dual identities prevents the reconciliation of their personalities both with themselves and with the other. The masquerade theme in BATMAN RETURNS (1992) becomes a game of signs. As in his other movies, Burton reinterprets established sign codes: black becomes white, and ugly is beautiful. Christmas, a leitmotif of the movie, is unmasked as commercial mass deception.[30] The perversion of Christmas suggests the protagonist's lost innocence: too often the violence is aimed at tokens of infantility and cuteness or stems directly from them – as in the case of Batman's gadget

27   Heger 2010, 174.
28   BATMAN RETURNS (1992), 01:32:21–01:32:23.
29   BATMAN RETURNS (1992), 01:34:01–01:34:03.
30   Merschmann 2000, 64–65.

Figs. 9–10: An embrace of mask and identity: at night, they fight as Batman and Catwoman (fig. 9); in the day, they meet as lovers Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle (fig. 10). Film stills, BATMAN RETURNS (Tim Burton, US 1992), 01:15:49 (fig. 9), 01:31:59 (fig. 10).



toys and Penguin's obscure weaponry. The destruction of anything "that appears benign, cute or cuddly" even led bewildered Batman-chronicler Mark S. Reinhart to the conclusion that Burton hatches a distaste for "just about anything that society at large would perceive as 'good.'"[31]

In the end, the concepts of good and evil or normal and abnormal are just a matter of perception. Arguably the only purely evil character in the movie is the

31   Reinhart 2005, 175–176.

human Max Shreck, who behind a façade of normalcy manipulates, corrupts and kills. As for the other freaks and monsters, Burton sees them not as villains, but as victimized individuals.[32] He breaks through the common association of disability with evil in fiction,[33] as his variation on the Obsessive Avenger–stereotype, a



Figs. 11–16: Burton's postmodern cabinet of monsters and their classic role models:

Catwoman (fig. 11) and Irena Dubrovna (Simone Simon) from Cᴀᴛ Pᴇᴏᴘʟᴇ (1942) (fig. 14, r.); Penguin (fig. 12) and Count Orlok (Max Schreck) from Nᴏsғᴇʀᴀᴛᴜ (1922) (fig. 15, r.); Batman (fig. 13) and Count Dracula (Bela Lugosi) from Dʀᴀᴄᴜʟᴀ (1931) (fig. 16, r.).





32  Salisbury 2006, 103.
33  See Norden 2007.

Film stills, BATMAN RETURNS (Tim Burton, US 1992), 01:03:10 (fig. 11, l.), 00:09:14 (fig. 12, l.), 01:16:55 (fig. 13, l.); CAT PEOPLE (Jacques Tourneur, US 1942), 00:21:26 (fig. 14); NOSFERATU, EINE SYMPHONIE DES GRAUENS (Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, DE 1922), 01:28:19 (fig. 12); DRACULA (Tod Browning, US 1931), 00:10:21 (fig. 16).

character who relentlessly pursues those he holds responsible for his disablement, is rendered as a misunderstood monster and applied to villains and heroes alike. As in most of Burton's work, in a Burton movie you fear not the Other but the "ordinary". In the end, BATMAN RETURNS (1992) is sheer gothic, modeled after the cinematic re-imaginings of classic gothic tales. Burton eagerly draws on the vast symbolic-image stock of the horror movie, influenced by German expressionism (see fig. 11–16). In the tradition of films like DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI (THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI, Robert Wiene, DE 1920), he uses stylized settings to illustrate the dark and twisted world of his film. Burton externalizes the protagonist's ambivalent psychic states in an opulent pictorial design. The repressed subconscious of the characters turns outward in the bizarre exaggerations and expressive color contrasts of the set design, the gloomy lighting, the costumes, the make-up and the sinister score by composer Danny Elfman. The characters' environments are framed as psychological dioramas that strung together would evoke the image of a multi-faceted theme park. Burton's Gotham is a world of décors in which no neutral space exists, no outside, no escape. A postmodern no man's land in which the signs of light and darkness, reason and madness, reality and fiction are perverted into their eerie opposites.

## A TASTE OF THEATRICALITY: THE DARK KNIGHT



Fig. 17: Ground zero: Christopher Nolan's THE DARK KNIGHT (2008) constantly evokes images from the traumatic terror attacks of 11 September 2001. Film still, THE DARK KNIGHT (Christopher Nolan, US 2008), 01:33:06.

Burton's Batman vision is dark, fatalistic, oppressive. The Dark Knight loves his shadowy existence so much that he refuses to stand in the light of attention. The proactive villains take over and marginalize the hero in his own movie. By contrast, in BATMAN BEGINS (2005) Christopher Nolan resets the Caped Crusader as the main protagonist of the story and explores the beginnings of the char-

acter. After Joel Schumacher's gaudy and flamboyant take in Batman Forever (US 1995) and Batman & Robin (US 1997), which did not resonate well with fans and critics, Nolan seeks to wipe the slate clean with his elaborate reboot of the character. Basically he brings the superhero "down to earth" and connects him with the contemporary American zeitgeist (see fig. 17). For that, he stepped outside the studio and shot on-location in major cities like Chicago and London (Batman Begins, 2005; The Dark Knight, 2008) and Los Angeles, New York and Pittsburgh (The Dark Knight Rises, US 2012) in order to compose a hyper-real cityscape of Gotham City. Following the films' courted authenticity and realism, Batman's world is purged of any supernatural, fantastic and whimsical elements that could expose its comic book source material. Instead, Nolan focuses in his first Batman movie on the Dark Knight's character development as he struggles to adopt a moral position in a corrupted society. The battle between good and evil is portrayed as a dispute between opposing principles, ideas and philosophies. Batman's ethical code, which requires him to work outside the law but never to kill, stems from the dialectic juxtaposition of his father figures: from the thesis of empathetic understanding embodied by his murdered father Thomas Wayne (Linus Roache) and carried further by his butler Alfred (Michael Caine) and the antithesis of absolute and revengeful justice claimed by his fundamentalist mentor Ducard/Ra's al Ghul (Liam Neeson) comes the synthesis of the principled avenger Batman (Christian Bale).

After 135 minutes of soul-searching in Batman Begins (2005), the masked vigilante is finally ready to face his equal – the Joker (Heath Ledger). At the end of the film, Lieutenant Gordon (Gary Oldman) has already established a connection between the two on the basis of their staged appearance. Gordon talks about escalation and how Batman's advent might encourage a new type of criminal. He hands the Dark Knight a joker card with the words, "You're wearing a mask, jumping off rooftops. Now, take this guy. Armed robbery, double homicide. Has a taste for the theatrical, like you."[34] Consequently, The Dark Knight (2008) opens with the introduction of the Joker. The prologue of the film shows a group of clown-masked gangsters robbing a mob bank while talking about their anonymous boss, the Joker. Their heist successful, they start to kill each other off in order to increase the share each will receive, until only one robber is left. Before he leaves with all the money, this last robber lifts his clown mask in an extreme close-up, revealing not his hidden identity, but another mask: the scarred and painted face of the Joker. The ambiguous masquerade of the prologue confirms Gordon's fears – the Joker is established as a direct consequence of Batman's theatricality. The Joker's "mask" dissolves the analogy between face and identity, for his "makeup does not hide his true identity, but

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34   Batman Begins (2005), 02:04:50–02:05:04.

instead attests to the absence of one",[35] making him a being of pure theatricality, a displayed sign of a sign (see fig. 18).[36]



Fig. 18: A natural force of evil? In his first appearance, the Joker just stands on a street corner, seemingly materialized out of nothing. Film still, The Dark Knight (Christopher Nolan, US 2008), 00:01:17.

In keeping with the film's main preoccupation with duality, the Joker is depicted not only as Batman's criminal equivalent but also as the ultimate counterforce who answers Batman's desire for order with chaos.[37] Their combat represents the constant struggle Batman has to face as outlaw vigilante: "Batman emerges as a hero positioned in the darkness between extremes, mediating between the oppressive power of modern systems and the chaos of postmodern anarchy".[38] In view of the increasing number of victims and the experience of powerlessness in his staged no-win scenarios, the battle against the Joker becomes a crucial test for the good. How can such boundless evil be countered? Nolan's Dark Knight trilogy is heavily influenced by the terror attacks of 9/11 and their aftermath. His Gotham City becomes a stage for America's current anxieties, with the audience compelled to connect their own experiences of 11 September with the experiences of the film,[39] above all in the confrontation with a faceless evil with which there can be no negotiation and which cannot be dealt with: "You have nothing, nothing to threaten me with. Nothing to do with all your strength", the Joker replies to the hard and desperate blows of the Dark Knight.[40] The interrogation scene between the two in Gordon's Police Department is a key scene of the film: under the eye of the law, Batman temporarily

35  McGowan 2012, 135.
36  Fischer-Lichte 1995, 88.
37  DiPaolo 2011, 59.
38  Regalado 2015, 227.
39  Muller 2011, 58.
40  The Dark Knight (2008), 01:26:32–01:26:39.

oversteps his limits and tortures the Joker in order to get information about the whereabouts of his two hostages in a literal ticking-bomb scenario (see fig. 19).



Fig. 19: Perfidious power game: even when in the ungentle grip of Batman, the Joker retains the upper hand. Film still, THE DARK KNIGHT (Christopher Nolan, US 2008), 01:26:33.

In order to beat the Joker, Batman creates an emergency situation, mirroring the extreme measures taken by the Bush administration in the War on Terror, with his pure intentions for justice and freedom irrevocably compromised and perverted. By crossing "a line beyond heroic exceptionality",[41] Batman blurs the line between good and evil.

"Why so serious?"[42] While Burton and Nicholson contrive the Joker in BATMAN (1989) as a postmodern homicidal artist celebrating insanity as freedom, Nolan retraces the archetype of the clown to his anarchistic roots. With twisted bodies, grotesque faces and nonsensical tirades, jesters in the Middle Ages offered criticism of the social status quo from the perspective of an outsider, inverting courtly and ecclesiastical norms with their devilish antics and exposing in their masquerades the duplicity of society. The jester was the ambassador of a netherworld from which humans could find their way back to the chaotic origins of life. Heath Ledger's Joker joins this tradition. As an agent of chaos he creates disorder and rocks the "schemers" to demonstrate the fragility of ideologically shaped worldviews. He inverts everything there is into its opposite. In his last encounter with Batman, the Joker dangles upside down on the Dark Knight's rope. While he explains his twisted worldview, the camera slowly rotates 180 degrees, until he is upright again and Gotham's night sky upside down. The Joker is a master of deception – with or without make-up, as corpse or as nurse. The fact that he has no secret identity, that his entire appearance functions as a whole-body mask links him directly to medieval fools who, according

41   McGowan 2012, 130.
42   THE DARK KNIGHT (2008), 00:29:27–00:29:30.

Fig. 20: Unlike for the protagonist of the silent classic THE MAN WHO LAUGHS (Paul Leni, US 1928), the reasons for the Joker's permanent smile remain mysterious. Film still, THE DARK KNIGHT (Christopher Nolan, US 2008), 00:05:28.

to Mikhail Bakhtin, "were not actors playing parts on stage … but remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance".[43] With his disconcerting speech patterns, gestures and way of walking, the Joker does not seem to be of this world, but rather has stepped out of the liminal world of carnival. He repeatedly calls attention to his mouth, highlighting his scars with red lipstick, smacking his lips, grinning and holding it directly into the camera (see fig. 20). In the subversive theatricality of the carnival, the concept of the grotesque body concentrates in the gaping mouth, for Bakhtin the symbol of a "wide-open bodily abyss".[44] The Joker's mouth gapes like a large wound in his face; by conjuring a smile onto his victim's face with a knife, he lets that victim share his own limitless blackness.

The face is the leitmotif of the film. Recalling Béla Balázs' early film theory of the visualization of man through his physiognomy on screen,[45] the faces in THE DARK KNIGHT (2008) become an important carrier of meaning (see fig. 21, r.). Looking into the painted visage of the Joker, one gets caught up in the maelstrom of his infinite malignity. In contrast, Batman's masked face becomes a symbol of resistance and hope, an immortal ideal that inspires people to follow his lead in the fight against crime. Unfortunately, his freely interpretable face also allows people to misconceive his ideal, as militant copycats take up arms and act against his intentions. Finally, there is the face of district attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), whose all-American look becomes a surface for projected hopes and optimism: "Look at this face. This is the face of Gotham's bright fu-

43   Bakhtin 1984, 8.
44   Bakhtin 1984, 317.
45   See Balázs 2011.

Fig. 21: This downloadable wallpaper from THE DARK KNIGHT's (2008) official website showcases the film's use of the face as an image of its underlying theme of duality. http://thedarkknight.warnerbros.com/dvdsite/media/images/downloads/TDK04_1600x1200.jpg [accessed 19 September 2016].

ture", Bruce Wayne declares at his fundraising party.[46] Dent is Gotham's shining white knight, a hero with a face that eventually could suspend the need for a masked Dark Knight. Behind this façade, however, lies a second face – Two-Face. Dent's flaw is his moral intransigency. In his monochrome worldview, good and evil are so widely separated that the self-righteous attorney cannot connect to his darker side, which erupts in occasional outbursts and acts of desperation. Dent's case alludes to the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Robert Louis Stevenson's famous examination of human nature's duality. Like Jekyll, Dent tries at all costs to hide his evil other, because he does not recognize it as part of his own self. Therefore, all it takes is a "little push" from the Joker and Harvey's world is turned upside down. Deprived of the love of his life and left with serious physical and mental injuries, his moral bigotry is gruesomely written in his face in the figure of the Janus-like Two-Face. After his departure from good, the only consistent option left to him is to join with evil: "Either you die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain."[47]

46  THE DARK KNIGHT (2008), 00:43:27–00:43:31.
47  THE DARK KNIGHT (2008), 00:20:01–00:20:05.

Figs. 22–27: Heads or tails – the dual philosophy of Harvey Dent/Two-Face is evident in his charred coin (figs. 22–24) as well as in his face (figs. 25–27, r.). Film stills, The Dark Knight (Christopher Nolan, US 2008), 01:35:27 (fig. 22), 01:35:33 (fig. 23), 01:35:42 (fig. 24), 02:15:17 (fig. 25, r.), 02:15:58 (fig. 26, r.), 02:16:02 (fig. 27, r.).

The motif of the face turns into the image of a coin where everything has a reverse side (see fig. 22–27). Two-Face lost his faith in the right decision and his decision-making ability. Instead of being the master of his own destiny, he

despairs of the cruel arbitrariness of human existence. This shift is symbolized by his lucky coin. At the beginning, the coin had two identical sides, thus negating the possibility of loss and highlighting his full control over life: "I make my own luck."[48] In the explosion that kills his fiancée, Rachel (Maggie Gyllenhaal), the coin, like he himself is burned on one side. Incapable of accepting the ten-

48   THE DARK KNIGHT (2008), 00:13:50–00:13:51.

sion of duality and of being at one with himself, he now leaves all life and death decisions to chance, his new god of justice: "The only morality in a cruel world is chance. Unbiased. Unprejudiced. Fair."[49] Harvey's lapse provides the backbone of the film's narrative. Evil has won. The Joker brought down the best and turned him into an insane cop killer. But the good must not lose, heroic stories are supposed to have a happy ending. So the result is marked: Batman takes on responsibility for Two-Face's crimes and is hunted by the police, while Harvey Dent died a hero's death and becomes the legend that Batman always wanted to be. Gotham's peace is restored, but on the basis of a lie: "Sometimes the truth is not good enough. Sometimes people deserve more."[50] This outcome is a clear reference to John Ford's late Western THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE (US 1962), in which the forged legend of a town's hero becomes a constitutive social truth. For Vincent M. Gaine, this compromise "problematizes the 'natural, unquestionable justice' favored by superhero narratives".[51] The ending of THE DARK KNIGHT (2008) evidently demonstrates that good and evil have no individual ontological status but are reciprocally constructed and conceptualized via storytelling. Thus Batman really is a floating signifier, for he can take on any role the city needs him to fulfill, enabled by the public: "Batman can convincingly play the dark knight only because his role was perceived as (potentially) evil from the outset – at least by a few. While Batman is the one who theatrically produces signs, those few represent the constitutive counterpart."[52]

## SHADOWS OF THE BAT

The dual cosmology of Manichaeism, which underlines the superhero narrative of the hero's fight against the villain, eventually serves as an explanation for the origin and essence of evil itself. Mani's belief system is based on the fundamental question, "Why does evil exist?"[53] In his view, evil does not exist as a lack of good, but as a real, powerful force that actively intervenes with the world. Evil opposes and negates everything that is good and pure; it seduces man to commit sin. Although corresponding with the notion of Satan in Christianity, Mani's binary belief contradicts the Christian dictates of monotheism, as the existence of an equally powerful counterforce denies the omnipotence of God. Nevertheless, the ideas of Manichaeism have influenced Western thinking until today. The image of a metaphysical evil as the ultimate adversary, as the devil who has to be fought with all means, can be found, for example, in the rhetoric

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49   THE DARK KNIGHT (2008), 02:12:30–02:12:40.
50   THE DARK KNIGHT (2008), 02:17:03–02:17:09.
51   Gaine 2011, 128.
52   Schlegel/Habermann 2011, 35.
53   See Coyle 2009, xiv.

of enemy stereotypes. Invoked bogeymen whose very existence threatens the Western value system, like the Germans during the World Wars, the Soviets in the Cold War or the Islamist terrorist of present day, carry a clear political function. Exploiting the fears, insecurities and prejudices of a community, enemy images help to simplify things in a complicated, globalized world by pinpointing a scapegoat. They strengthen a weakened group identity via exclusion and serve as a means of justification for a political agenda.[54] The United States, in particular, has a long tradition of enemy images. In times of war and conflict, American politicians constantly evoke the Manichaean rhetoric of good versus evil, posing God's chosen people against foreign enemies of freedom and democracy. Considering the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, George W. Bush declared that the United States were "at war" and famously labeled enemy states like North Korea, Iran and Iraq, which seek weapons of mass destruction and allegedly support terrorism, an "axis of evil".[55] Throughout his presidency, he constituted a bipolar world of "freedom" and "fear", "us" and "them".[56]

In their Batman movies, Tim Burton and Christopher Nolan visualize the dynamics of enemy images; they deconstruct the Manichaean worldview by illustrating its flipside and highlighting its fragility. In place of the dualistic belief system, their movies propose an alternative discourse about the nature and origin of evil. In the case of BATMAN RETURNS (1992), Burton tells a modern fairytale about good and evil from the perspective of the rejected other. He lets us partake in the "personal catharsis" he gains from identification with "characters who are both mentally and physically different":[57] He renders Batman, Penguin and Catwoman non-conformists who use their alleged otherness to express their independency and are therefore sanctioned by a hostile collective. For that, Burton utilizes the gothic imagery of horror movies he grew up with, but reverses it. Originally, the monster in classic U.S. horror films was depicted as an inhuman, external force of evil that invades the idyllic harmony of everyday American life. Thereby it has often functioned as a coded sign for contemporary images of the enemy[58] and a social panic that the traditional order within the sexes, races and classes could collapse.[59] In BATMAN RETURNS (1992), monstrosity is a sign not of evil, but of isolating individuality, while the so-called normalcy conceals true viciousness. Like the pitiable creature (Boris Karloff) in James Whale's FRANKENSTEIN (US 1931), Burton's monsters are inherently innocent; it is the confrontation with a xenophobic society that makes them evil.

54    See Fiebig-von Hase 1997, 1–40.
55    Bush 2002.
56    See Wagner 2009, 31.
57    Hanke 2007, 95.
58    See Worland 1997.
59    Seeßlen/Jung 2006, 127.

In THE DARK KNIGHT (2008), Nolan demonstrates his deep passion for fictionality and storytelling as he exposes the duality of good and evil as a key rhetoric in the narrative of a society that uses these terms to justify its actions. On the surface, the Joker incarnates the enemy image of a terrorist, as he is represented as a resourceful force of destruction that cannot be negotiated with, a mad man determined to watch the world burn. His real intensions, however, are to face Gotham's inhabitants with their own viciousness, which primarily resides in their utilitarian ethics of "scheming". For him, cops and criminals behave the same, for they are enslaved to the selfish object of their plan. In his sadistic games of life and death, he confronts the people of Gotham with the "logic of their scheming taken to its end point", but also "provides an opportunity for them to break out of calculation".[60] So the Joker's evil is actually the basis for the hero's ethics. Ultimately, THE DARK KNIGHT (2008) is not about the nature of evil, but about the way it is fought by the good. Does Batman make the right decision? Are his means just? Reflecting America's ongoing War on Terror, the movie refuses to give an unequivocal answer. Instead, the movie implies a shifting, fluid moral universe where the characters embody contradictory, unstable positions.[61] Because of this complexity, some interpreted the movie as praise for Bush's conservative policies, where the boundaries of civil rights were pushed in order to "deal with an emergency".[62] Others, however, saw Batman's use of torture and a problematic surveillance technology as critique of the Bush regime.[63] From reactionary to subversive, the movie's political message above all lies in "the blurring of boundaries" and "instability of oppositions",[64] favoring ambiguity over simplistic duality.

Tim Burton and Christopher Nolan persuasively question the clear separation of good and evil as well as their ontological statuses. They unmask them as ideological attributions often misused for propaganda, as makeshift explanatory patterns for complex human behavior. Consequently, their Batman movies exhibit that the struggle between good and evil is fought not externally, but internally. Moving from the subject of morality to a broader scale, the dispute between contrary principles articulates the antagonistic tendencies in the individual, which are constantly fighting.[65] There the fictional representations of good and evil function as interchangeable metaphors for the many dichotomies that define human nature, whether in the conflict between individuality and conformity, inside and outside, normal and abnormal (BATMAN RETURNS, 1992)

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60  McGowan 2012, 141.
61  Brooker 2012, 204–207.
62  Klavan 2008.
63  Ip 2011, 229.
64  Brooker 2012, 207.
65  See Hickethier 2008, 238.

Fig. 28: Batman's shadowy appearance marks him as liminal character who inhabits a space between light and darkness, justice and anarchy, good and evil. Film still, Batman Returns (Tim Burton, US 1992), 00:55:37.

or the fight between order and chaos, justice and vengeance, rule and exception (The Dark Knight, 2008). What image could be more suitable, then, to illustrate these antagonisms than the shadowy figure of Batman, the very representation of duality itself? His whole nature as bat-man, as semi-entity, symbolizes the permeability of boundaries as he unites hero and villain, light and darkness, man and beast, idea and matter (see fig. 28). Among his clownish foes and circus counterparts, Batman is the true embodiment of the trickster archetype. He shifts between worlds, defies clear categories and signifies ambivalence. His multiplicity attracts artists like Burton and Nolan, who can express their individual vision through the versatility of his image.

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Thomas Hausmanninger

# Deconstructing Gilgul, Finding Identity

## Captain America and the Winter Soldier
## in a Judaistic Perspective

### ABSTRACT

Captain America and Bucky, characters who appear in Marvel Comics, seem to be temporally displaced. The article scrutinizes that temporal displacement, comparing it with the Judaistic concept of *gilgul* – the transmigration or reincarnation of the soul – in Kabbalah and Hasidism. Furthermore, the article compares the presentation of these characters and their displacement in the original comics and the subsequent movies.

### KEYWORDS

Marvel Comics, Movies of Marvel Comics, Judaism, Reincarnation

### BIOGRAPHY

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For about a decade there has been a significant increase in the number of publications about the relationship between Jews, Jewishness and Judaism, on one hand, and comics, on the other. Noteworthy popular or journalistic studies that are the work of comic-industry insiders, comic journalists or savvy fans document the history of primarily American comics and their Jewish authors.[1] Additionally, however, scholarly interest in Jews and comics has grown notably and looks beyond American production.[2] In both instances Judaism as religion may be touched upon, but it is infrequently the focus of these studies. Instead they tend to concentrate mostly on Jews and their history as a people and some-

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1    Fingeroth 2007; Kaplan 2008.
2    Baskind/Omer-Sherman 2010; Benhaïm 2007; Buhle 2008; Strömberg 2012; Tabachnick 2014; Leroy 2015.

times adopt the newer inner-Jewish perspective that reconstructs Jewishness as a culture, with Judaism a vital formative ingredient.[3] Yet an ultimately religious reading of comics can also be identified – as has also been evident for Christianity.[4]

The authors, especially when scholars, do not necessarily stem from the religious background they are analyzing in the comics.[5] I, too, am not Jewish. I am, however, fascinated by Judaism and its vast history of theological thinking, and I currently work on Judaism in Franco-Belgian comics. My non-Jewishness notwithstanding, I would like to present here a Judaistic reading of the Captain America comics and movies. The series was created by Jewish authors and artists, although since the time of Joe Simon, Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, many other authors have worked on the series, not all of them Jewish. Furthermore, the movies have been produced, written and directed by a diverse group of creative people, although they draw on material from throughout the series, including the very first episodes of the 1940s and 1960s. That situation necessitates some methodological reflections at the beginning of this article; subsequently I scrutinize Captain America and Ed Brubaker's reactivation of Bucky Barnes in comics and movies using a Judaistic and Kabbalistic perspective focused on the concept of *gilgul*.

## MARVEL COMICS AND JUDAISM: METHODOLOGICAL PRELIMINARIES

Neither Stan Lee nor Jack Kirby intentionally involved Judaism or even Jewishness as a cultural trait in their comics. Lee, who was in a mixed marriage, never seems to have had strong ties to his religious background, and he explicitly denied ever reflecting on the Jewishness of his creations.[6] Kirby, by contrast, came from a religious family and seems to have been a practicing Jew, yet he, too, did not intentionally involve his religion in his co-plotting[7] – at least not before he left Marvel in 1971 and created his Fourth World saga and, in his later days, comics such as *Silverstar*. A similar distancing from their religious roots can be seen in other Jewish members of the Marvel bullpen. Indeed evident religious references sought to ensure that their Marvel comics blended in with the dominant Christian American culture. So, for example, the wedding of Reed Richards and Sue Storm of the Fantastic Four is not carried out as a Jewish marriage,

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3   Biale 2002, 2011; Bronner 2008.
4   Weinstein 2006; Garrett 2008.
5   Ahrens/Brinkmann/Riemer 2015.
6   Brod 2012, 90.
7   Brod 2012, 85, 89.

but is prepared and performed by an obviously Christian clergyman.[8] In *Captain America* explicit positive references to Christianity can even be found. At the end of one of his frays with Batroc, Captain America emphasizes the value of giving one's "life for the masses" as someone did "centuries ago", an apparent reference to Jesus.[9] Two years later Captain America cites Matthew 16:26 to underline the importance of remaining true to oneself.[10] A reader's comment on the first reference that appears on the letters page supposes that Stan Lee's "religious background probably is that of the traditional Christian view in America", a supposition that goes uncorrected.[11] While it is indeed the case that there are no responses to any of the letters on that page, when that absence is seen together with the positive references to Christianity, it can be understood as an attempt to camouflage Lee's Jewish identity and assimilate the comics to the dominant Christian culture.

Thus, aside from Izzy Cohen of Sgt. Fury's Howling Commandos or Sidney Levine of S.H.I.E.L.D, who seem to have been the very first Jewish characters in comic books (and still could not be labeled as such),[12] explicitly Jewish characters and Jewish themes are only found in Marvel comics more than a decade later – for example, in Kitty Pryde and in Magneto's Jewish background in Chris Claremont's X-Men stories and subsequent films.[13] Comic experts and scholars broadly agree, however, that Lee and Kirby both intuitively drew on their Judaistic and Jewish heritage when they developed their characters and plots.[14] Consequently such references in their comics remain indirect: Judaism appears in disguise in character traits, transfigured narrative topoi, and values that are often amalgamated with American civil religion. In Lee and Kirby's *Captain America* the references to Judaism that can be reconstructed are therefore mostly, perhaps solely, implicit.

Ed Brubaker attests to having been "raised going to church"; he therefore has a Christian background, even though he emphasizes that he does not believe in God and is not a religious person.[15] While it is still possible that Brubaker uses Judaistic references to embellish his stories, they would therefore seem unlikely to be intentional. None of his interviews give any clues to anything more. Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely, the scriptwriters of the Captain America movies, also provide no information about any deliberate referencing of Judaism. Certainly Brubaker, Marcus and McFeely draw heavily upon

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8    Fantastic Four 37/1965, 19f; Fantastic Four Annual 3/1965, 23.
9    Captain America 105/1968, 20.
10   Captain America 122/1970, 4.
11   Captain America 108/1968, LP.
12   Fingeroth 2007, 108–109.
13   Brod 2012, 93–94.
14   Fingeroth 2007, 92–112; Kaplan 2008, 92–115, 126–136; Brod 2012, 66–100.
15   Brubaker 2012.

the classic Captain America stories by Lee and Kirby, which leaves open the possibility that they have unintentionally and unknowingly incorporated indirect references to Judaism generated by the original authors, but that argument is rather tenuous, and hardly provides solid foundations for Judaistic references in Brubaker's take on Captain America and in Marcus and McFeely's movies.

I adopt here a different hermeneutic approach. German scholarly culture still prefers to look for explicit intentions or, at least, implicit links in an author's background when the specific traits of that author's work are being reconstructed. American scholars, however, permit themselves to adopt thematic perspectives that cannot be linked with authorial intent or background.[16] In that approach, a relationship with religion is established largely on the sole basis of the text itself. I shall meander between those two approaches – I hold it likely that Lee and Kirby unintentionally created parallels to Judaism in their narrative constructions, whereas it seems to me that the narrative creations of Brubaker, Marcus and McFeely may involuntarily carry links to these parallels where they use material generated by Lee and Kirby. Additionally, the application of a Judaistic perspective to Captain America and Bucky is legitimate when structural or topological parallels can be established and provides interesting insights even when a direct or indirect relationship between the narrative material and Judaism cannot be substantiated.

In that respect I shall scrutinize the temporal displacement and ordeals of Captain America and Bucky in comics and movies through the lens of the Judaistic concept of *gilgul* (reincarnation). As we will see, *gilgul* and the displacement of Captain America and Bucky have significant topological correlations. A reader might wonder why I choose to concentrate on *gilgul* rather than on the broader traditions of Hinduism or Buddhism, where reincarnation certainly has a more central position; I would point out to that reader the established links of Captain America to Judaism, and the absence of any such links to Asian religions (although I recognize a Hinduist or Buddhist view can be applied[17]). Furthermore, both the concept of *gilgul* and Captain America's quest have identity as a background theme, with both affirming that identity can only be found by understanding oneself in relation to community and by working for the betterment of the world (*tikkun*).[18] That position is distinct from the modern (and

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16  Mills/Morehead/Parker 2013, 5.
17  See, for example, Mohapatra 2010.
18  There may also be parallels in the tradition of American literature, where we also find accounts of the temporal displacement of a character, as for example in Washington Irving's "Rip van Winkle" or Mark Twain´s "Yankee at King Arthur´s Court". While the latter sends someone into the past (the most common form of time travel, in science fiction too), Rip van Winkle travels to the future – as does Donald Duck in a classic 1950s Carl Barks story based, ironically, on Irving's tale (WDCS 112/1950). It might be revealing to consider at least Irving´s endeavor in relation to Captain America – but my goal here is different. Other than with Carl Barks in the cited story, Kirby and Lee – like Brubaker, Markus and McFeely – do not establish obvious connections with the literary tradition.

more traditionally American) idea of individual identity as something constituted only by the subject and only free of social bounds, but it is in line with the broad Judaistic tradition of emphasizing the importance of community and the Judaistic topos of healing the world.

## THE MANY LIVES OF CAPTAIN AMERICA AND BUCKY

When Joe Simon and Jack Kirby launched *Captain America Comics* in the early 1940s, America had not yet entered the Second World War. Yet the two authors had their hero sock Hitler in the face on the cover of the first issue, even though that scene was not taken up in any of the stories featured inside.[19] Like the majority of the Jewish American population, both authors strongly favored American participation in the war,[20] as a product of their concern for European Jews. Their Captain America comics thus functioned on one level as a popular form of *littérature engagée*. Even though Simon and Kirby stayed with their creation only for the first ten issues – they left Timely Comics, and other authors, including Stan Lee, continued the production – their political engagement in the series laid the groundwork for Captain America's strong links to reflective discourse about ideas, values and questions of societal existence.

The Captain America comics of the 1940s were an undoubted success, with some million copies per issue sold. It is therefore hardly surprising that Lee and Kirby wished to reuse the character (after a short and unsuccessful stint in the 1950s) when Marvel Comics debuted in the 1960s. Seeking to build on the success of the 1940s, they planned to revive the original character, the "living legend of World War II" as the splash page of *Tales of Suspense* had it from issue 69/1965 on. To do so they invented a narrative gimmick that bridged the gap between Captain America's first appearance and his revival. In *Avengers* 4/1964, Captain America is found by Prince Namor, another creation of the 1940s, inside a large ice block in the Arctic Ocean, and subsequently thawed out and rescued by the Avengers. His frozen state explains why he has not aged in appearance, but the cryo-hibernation determines not only his unaltered physical state but also his psychological condition, his unchanged personality and mindset, which have not been touched by the passing decades, societal changes and cultural developments. Lee and Kirby could thus ensure that readers identified in their Captain America precisely the character who had been such a success in the 1940s – and would not confused him with the unsuccessful endeavor of the 1950s. But by planting the unaltered Captain America of the 1940s in the 1960s without giving him the chance to experience, and psychologically evolve with,

19   Captain America Comics 1/1941.
20   Brod 2012, 66, 69; Fingeroth 2007, 57.

the decades in between, they also created something unique among superheroes: a character with temporal displacement. The cryo-hibernation in effect extracted Captain America from his present and placed him in a completely different time. It was as if he had died in the 1940s and been reincarnated in the 1960s. The process in the movies is very similar, but with a time gap that at almost seven decades is even more extreme.

The temporal displacement of Captain America bears striking resemblance to the Judaistic concept of *gilgul*, the transmigration or reincarnation of the soul. The same can be said of Brubaker's reintroduction of Bucky as the Winter Soldier in the 2000s and the movies' adoption of these comics. The concept of *gilgul* first appeared in an affirmative form in the book *Bahir*, which was redacted in the 12th century.[21] It then became part of the Kabbalah, especially in the teachings of Yitzchak Luria (1534–1572) and the writings of his disciple Hayim Vital (1543–1620). Via the Kabbalah, reincarnation took root in Hasidism and it remains a presence in contemporary Kabbalistic, Hasidic and Jewish mystic circles.[22] In the Zohar and the Iurian Kabbalah the transmigration of the soul is intensively interwoven with cosmology, whereas Hasidism focuses on spiritual destiny and development of the individual.[23] The common principal reason for reincarnation lies, however, in the need for the purification and elevation of the soul.[24] After the Zohar and from the 14th century on, chains of reincarnation were constructed, connecting biblical persons.[25]

Expanding Judaistic moral anthropology, which differentiates between the wicked, the mediocre and the just, two reasons for incarnation are given – while the mediocre are sent back into another circle of earthly life to be given another chance to purify and elevate their souls (the wicked are sent to hell, *gehennom*, for purification), the just may also return in order that they might assist others and for the betterment of the world.[26] Hasidism, in particular, developed stories about famous spiritual masters, *tsaddikim*, who return after their deaths to other bodies. Reflections on a past life or past lives became important, providing the starting point for theories about reincarnation that explained, for example, the seemingly pointless suffering of children as a form of retribution for their sins in another life. Even though the soul normally has no recollection of its past life, detecting that past life began to function not only as an explanation for present sufferings – not unlike the Hindu or Buddhist concept of *karma* – but also as a vital basis for overcoming such suffering and leading the soul to

21   Eylon 2003, 89–124.
22   Pinson 1999, viii; Weiss 2005.
23   Grözinger 2005, 463–682; 805–808.
24   Pinson 1999.
25   Scholem 1956, 75–76.
26   Scholem 1956, 73–74.

a new spiritual level. The Hasidic *tsaddik* there often played the specific role of a wise individual who knows someone's past life and can help untangle present biographical constellations.[27] Also, souls that have been connected by kinship, marriage or common experience in their past existence may meet again in another life and help each other perform the remaining tasks of redemption and purification.[28]

From the 13th century on, speculation that parts of the soul were reincarnated began to spread.[29] These ideas were grounded in a medieval Judaistic differentiation of the soul: *nefesh* as the vegetative and life spending soul, *ruach* as the animalistic spirit and *neshama* as the rational soul.[30] The Kabbalah also differentiates between each of these souls, making them hierarchical levels of spiritual development and completing these levels with two other souls, *chay-ya* and *yichida*, the highest reachable levels.[31] These concepts form the origins of the associated idea of sparks of the soul, which may be reincarnated separately,[32] generating the additional concept of soul sparks' inhabiting a living person and besieging his or her own soul. With parallels to the two principal grounds for reincarnation – a bad soul returning for purification, and a just soul to help others – both the whole soul and sparks can influence an existing person in two directions: the *Zohar* contains the idea that at a crucial moment an individual might additionally be inhabited by a just soul that has already been to Paradise and now returns to further the efforts of that individual to fulfill a command and purify his or her soul;[33] the same support can be given by the sparks of the souls of the just. In Hasidism that role may be played by a *tsaddik* who returns and impregnates the soul of a living individual to further spiritual development,[34] a positive form of impregnation called *ibbur*. A negative form of impregnation also exists, however, and may take place when an individual turns to the dark side of life and sins. He or she then may open his or her soul to impregnation with the whole soul or spark of a wicked one.[35] Popular Jewish culture of the 17th century coined the term *dybbuk* for that negative form of impregnation.[36] In both cases the impregnation can last a whole life or only a certain period.[37]

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27  Grözinger 2005, 739–742.
28  Grözinger 2005, 742.
29  Scholem 1956, 78–79, 80–81.
30  Scholem 1956, 81.
31  Pinson 1999, 35.
32  Scholem 1956, 78f, 80, 83.
33  Scholem 1956, 86.
34  Scholem 1956, 89; Pinson 1999, 109.
35  Scholem 1956, 88; Pinson 1999, 115.
36  Scholem 1956, 88; Pinson 1999, 116–117.
37  Scholem 1956, 86.

The theme of temporal displacement is introduced in *Avengers* 4/1964, where Captain America comments on the differences between the life-worlds, urban civilization and everyday technology of his time and the 1960s.[38] He is already experiencing these differences as a loss of his proper place: "I don't belong in this age – in this year – no place for me."[39] This experience is reiterated throughout the Captain America series, where Captain America even deems himself "a relic – a holdover from some dim and dismal past".[40] Having lost his temporal setting and with it his cultural setting, Captain America feels exiled in a way. That topos can also be found in the Iurian Kabbalah, where *gilgul* is interpreted as the necessary wandering of the soul through exile, when the soul has to work for its own redemption.[41] Indeed, from the start Captain America's temporal displacement is combined with a deep backstory wound, which must be healed, and by a feeling of guilt, with which he must be reconciled. In the 1960s, superhero sidekicks seemed outmoded, and Stan Lee, who had never been fond of these juvenile characters, decided to drop Bucky. To that end, a flashback scene in "Avengers" comics showed how Bucky had been killed in the last mission he and Captain America had executed, after which the latter was frozen.[42] From that point on Captain America suffers from survivor's guilt, because he had been unable to save his youthful partner.[43] His journey into the exile of the present is thus motivated from the start by a need to overcome what he feels as past wrongs and to find redemption for his soul.

Some of these aspects are played down significantly by the movies. Yes, Captain America also experiences temporal displacement in the movies, but he is only moderately out of date. In the second movie, agent Romanov, the Black Widow, ironically asks Captain America, in his civilian identity as Steve Rogers, and Sam Wilson, the Falcon: "Either one of you know where the Smithsonian is? I'm here to pick up a fossil."[44] In no scene, however, does Captain America act in light of this displacement. Even his attitude toward women, surely an opportunity to highlight very different understandings of acceptable behavior and of the specific roles of men and women – as found in the TV series *Agent Carter*, a spinoff of the Captain America movies – appears to be nearly up-to-date in the 2000s. Instead, the temporal displacement mostly concerns Captain America's loss of his former social ties, especially his love Peggy Carter, and the new configuration of good and evil in global politics. The latter is of particular concern

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38   Avengers 4/1964, 9.
39   Avengers 4/1964, 10.
40   Captain America 107/1968, 6.
41   Scholem 1956, 107.
42   Avengers 4/1964, 7.
43   Avengers 4/1964, 7, 10–11.
44   THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 00:03:10.

for Captain America's identity, which in the movies, too, is strongly connected with political ideas and the political ethos.

As stated above, redemption is the central reason for reincarnation. To find redemption, the soul must perform better in situations similar to those it sinned in during its past existence, usually by obeying commands it once neglected or contradicted. Kinship relations or other connections between souls in the constellations of past lives can come into play here also. True to these Kabbalistic points, in the comics Captain America tries to right the wrong he feels he had done to Bucky. In his reintroduction issue, Rick Jones, the youthful partner of the Hulk, appears to him as if Bucky reincarnated.[45] Captain America and Rick Jones therefore relate to each other like souls connected by a common past life, and Captain America feels a very specific responsibility for Rick. Subsequently co-plot writer Jim Steranko even has Rick act as Captain America's sidekick wearing Bucky's costume.[46] In the first case Captain America saves Rick from deadly dangers and thus tries to rectify his (supposed) past failure in the present;[47] in the second case Rick shows he is capable of taking care of himself and thus exculpates Captain America symbolically.[48] However, Captain America has to confront his survivor's guilt again and again, until Ed Brubaker resurrects Bucky. In an emblematic issue, Lee and Kirby have evil psychoanalyst Dr. Faustus seek to use Captain America's feelings of temporal displacement and guilt to destroy the hero mentally. The Captain is confronted with psychotic situations in which Bucky accuses him, Nazis torture him and he seems to have aged overnight into a feeble old man.[49] Here especially, the central task of Captain America's new life is shown as an existential process of the soul. Also, other relationships from his past life are structurally reiterated – as, for example, through the love stories with the woman from the French Resistance in the Second World War and with Agent 13, Sharon Carter, in the present, or through Captain America's struggles with past foes like the Red Skull and Zemo.[50]

Once again the movies moderate traits of the comics. In the first movie Bucky seemingly falls to his death not from a plane, as in the comics, but from a train. Even though Captain America blames himself for the death of his partner, the moment is only briefly presented in the first movie, with a short scene in which he is shown trying to get drunk out of remorse, and that moment is swiftly overcome by Peggy Carter's admonition that leads the Captain back into action against Hydra.[51] In the second movie Captain America has a sentimental mo-

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45  Avengers 4/1964, 10.
46  Captain America 110, 111, 113/1969.
47  Avengers 4/1964, 22.
48  Captain America 111/1969, 15, 17.
49  Captain America 107/1968, 3, 9f, 15-16.
50  Tales of Suspense 77/1966.
51  CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE FIRST AVENGER (2011), 1:30:00.

ment at the Smithsonian's exhibition about his previous life, when he encounters the display about his friendship with Bucky,[52] but there is none of the tormenting remorse he experiences in the comics. Even though Captain America's survivor's guilt is not a dominant feature of the movies, the reiteration of past constellations and the resurfacing of past foes do appear. So, for example, Sharon Carter, who in the comics is a relative of Captain America's old love, is mentioned in the second movie.[53] From amongst his foes, in the first movie Captain America again confronts Dr. Armin Zola, the evil scientist and henchman of the Red Skull, who lives on as an artificial intelligence and orchestrated the subversion of S.H.I.E.L.D by Hydra.[54]

In Brubaker's revival of Bucky in the comics, Bucky had definitely died before he was picked up by the submarine of Russian General Vasily Karpov after the fatal incident told in the flashback scene of *Avengers* 4/1964.[55] Karpov delivers Bucky to his Communist superiors and he is revived, but besides his physical and trained reflexes and learned languages, he has lost his complete memory.[56] He thus offers the Russians very special skills but a blank personality, and from the 1950s to the 1970s is reprogrammed with a completely new personality and, codenamed "Winter Soldier", used for undercover contract killer missions in the West.[57] Between missions he is returned to cryogenic stasis and thus does not significantly age over the decades. He serves as Karpov's bodyguard in the 1980s and, after decades-long stasis, is used again in the 2000s by Russian general Lukin, who at the time of the story is inhabited by the Red Skull.[58]

From a Kabbalistic viewpoint, Bucky, having been undoubtedly dead, is reincarnated into his own body, but regains only parts of his soul – the vegetative and animalistic aspects and some of his acquired rational abilities. His new programming superimposes a different and evil soul, that is to say, a *dybbuk*. In accord with Kabbalistic theory, in his previous life Bucky had acquired a negative disposition that accounted for his impregnation with that *dybbuk*: Brubaker gives Bucky an additional backstory from his time with the military in the 1940s, when he was trained by the U.S. Army to carry out killer missions that official members of the army could not execute. The remaining aspects of Bucky's original soul, however, are still linked to the soul parts he lost and that formed his personality and biographical memory. These links render him unstable, so that his Russian superiors in the late 1950s make him "undergo Mental Implantation

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52   THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 0:19:00.
53   THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 2:06:00.
54   THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 1:03:14.
55   Captain America 11/2005, 5.
56   Captain America 11/2005, 6-7.
57   Captain America 11/2005, 9.
58   Captain America 14/2006, 22.

at every awakening".[59] Thus, in addition to his *dybbuk* Bucky also receives mission-specific soul sparks that renew the *dybbuk* on each instance. Even though he goes AWOL after a mission in America in the 1970s, Bucky is incapable of remembering his past life on his own.[60] He therefore needs the help of a *tsaddik* – which fittingly is Captain America – to remember his previous life, regain his personality and thus find the *tikkun* of his soul.[61] In a second series Brubaker has Bucky undergo his ordeal again: on a mission against other remaining sleeper agents of the Cold War, who were once trained by Bucky, he is pinned against one of these sleepers, who even forces him temporarily to renew his *dybbuk* and become the original Winter Soldier again.[62]

Again, the movies differ from the comics. Not only does it remain open whether Bucky had died and is then revived, but additionally he does not fall into the hands of the Russians and work as a Communist agent. Instead he is rescued by Nazi organization Hydra and reprogrammed by Dr. Zola to serve as its "fist".[63] He is, however, also *dybbuk*ed. Unlike in the comics, Bucky had not acquired a negative disposition for that *dybbuk* in his previous life – he is basically a good person, and thus Hydra's double agent Pierce has to deceive him about the character of his missions: he tells Bucky that his "work has been a gift to mankind"[64] and that the goal of Hydra is "to give the world the freedom it deserves".[65] Also unlike in the comics, Bucky experiences flashbacks from his previous life all by himself.[66] His mind, however, is wiped, and at the end of the second movie, Captain America must once more act as a *tsaddik* for Bucky, helping him to start remembering who he really was and is. That process is continued in the third movie, where Bucky regains his complete memory and fights alongside Captain America in a mission to counter the revival of Hydra's sleeper agents – the movie thus reproduces parts of the second cycle of Brubaker's stories about the Winter Soldier and again modifies elements. Bucky thus seeks redemption for his actions as an assassin for Hydra.

## FINDING IDENTITY

One theme that is not explicitly treated but nevertheless forms in effect a subconscious gravitational center for the concept of *gilgul* is that of identity. Finding the true self connects, for example, the links in the chains of reincarnation

59   Captain America 11/2005, 13.
60   Captain America 11/2005, 14–16.
61   Captain America 14/2006.
62   Winter Soldier 1–14/2011–2013.
63   THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 1:25:00; 1:37:00.
64   THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 1:28:57.
65   THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 1:29:27.
66   THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 1:37:44.

for biblical characters, motivates *tsaddikim* to enlighten community members about their past lives and spurs a quest to detect and eliminate *dybbukim*. In the two latter instances the goal is to enable a person who is experiencing psychological dissonances to find inner coherence and to overcome social dissonances between an individual and that individual's community. The person is to become whole by righting past wrongs, including those that have affected social constellations. In that respect, the similarities between past and present constellations join the contemporary iteration of relationships between souls that were connected in the past in enabling evolution toward a better end, which in the Hasidic context is often helped by a *tsaddik*. In the lurian Kabbalah in particular, the soul's task includes working for the elevation of all things, of the whole world, into holiness by fulfilling the commandments and, in case of reincarnation, rectifying the wrong constellations of the past.[67]

The Kabbalah there takes up the more general Judaistic topos of healing the world as the specific task of God's chosen people. Both the redemption of the soul and the elevation of the world are called *tikkun*, which can be translated as "rectification", "restitution" and "completion".[68] Thus the identity question is answered with a specific task that can be recognized by being informed about one's past life and that gives one's present life its specific meaning and fulfillment. Through the connection with the *tikkun* of the world, that task includes working for the betterment of the present state of the world and of that world's social relations. Finding one's identity thus always means finding one's social place and specific task in the world.

On the subject of identity, Judaism thus differs significantly from modern (Western) thinking: since René Descartes and Immanuel Kant's epochal turn that made subjectivity the foundation of philosophy, identity in modern Western culture has been conceptualized as an autonomous act of the rational subject – or, more pointedly even, as the construction of a human individual on the basis of his or her inner processes of self-constitution alone. *Freedom* rather than *relationship* is thus the modern *conditio sine qua non* for finding identity, a position that is not part of Judaism (which in the case of the United States is more in line with communitarian concepts than with modern and postmodern individualism).

In the comics Captain America is his own *tsaddik*, for he is aware of his past life and thus knows the knots it contains. As a *tsaddik* he is his own spiritual guide and master. He must find, however, his place in the present and thus his identity in new social circumstances. His quest for identity is not undertaken as a solitary inner act of self-constitution; from the outset it is situated in the ex-

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67   Scholem 1956, 107.
68   Pinson 1999, 53.

ternal context of his subjectivity, an essential context if he is to find his identity. And his quest is not about gaining his identity for selfish reasons; the goals of his quest are necessarily concerned with (political) society and human community. Captain America can only find himself if he works for the ideals of that society and thus for securing a communal life based on these ideals.

From the beginning the quest for the *tikkun* of his soul – his search for redemption because of Bucky's presumed death – is interwoven with his quest for the *tikkun* of the world. Consequently, Captain America can only find his identity and become whole when he is able to name the reason for his existence in the present world. In the issue in which he is reintroduced that reason is given as "being in costume – on the trail of some strange, unknown menace!",[69] but very soon that idea is complemented by the values of individual freedom and the liberty of society for which he had already fought in the Second World War. Spreading these values and fighting anything that menaces them becomes Captain America's *raison d´être*. The temporal displacement he experiences, however, saves him from becoming a one-dimensional representative of chauvinistic nationalism. Instead, Captain America increasingly becomes the reflective hero. In an iconic issue, Stan Lee and artist and co-writer Gene Colan have him question his actions and ethos over five of the 20 pages.[70] The passage generated many months of letter-page discussion, involving readers and Lee about patriotism. With this issue, reflectiveness became a permanent trait of the series and its hero. His ethos and critical reflectiveness also made Captain American the leader of the resistance to governmental control of superheroes in Marvel Comics' *Civil War* event of 2006/7 – and have him resign that role after he has experienced the disastrous consequences of the ensuing conflict.

His striving for freedom and his critical thinking mean that Captain America constantly works for the *tikkun* of the world, in which he finds his identity. And even though he identifies his quest as fighting for freedom, namely the freedom of individuals, that quest cannot be fulfilled by realization of his own freedom; his task is to work for a society whose freedom and constitution go hand in hand, for a community that offers relationships of freedom and thus constitutes a body politic. Captain America was a communitarian long before communitarianism appeared in the 1980s as a political theory – and his communitarianism is a product of his ties to Judaism and to the Judaistic concept of community as the necessary context for and counterpart to becoming an individual. In Brubaker's revival of Bucky, the character regains his identity in relation to the people in the world around him and by redeeming the deeds of his past life as the

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69   Avengers 4/1964, 12.
70   Captain America 122/1970, 1–5.

Winter Soldier. He only finds his true self by righting the wrongs of the past, and thus he too realizes the *tikkun* of his soul by working for the *tikkun* of the world.

Here the movies do follow the comics, even though Captain America does not demonstrate critical thinking or question his actions to the same extent as in the comics. Nevertheless, he has to be reflective and autonomous if he is to realize his ethos and adapt his quest for liberty to the present. The Second World War context was, he recognizes, different and less complicated, for the Nazis were an obvious evil, and indeed, in the United States the Second World War is still termed the "Good War". In the present world things are more complicated, so Captain America muses, "For as long as I can remember, I just wanted to do what was right. I guess I'm not quite sure what that is anymore. And I thought I could throw myself back in and follow orders. Serve. It's just not the same."[71] Instead of simply integrating himself into given institutions, like the army in times of war and now S.H.I.E.L.D, he has to find his own position and make his own judgments. As the showdown approaches, positions of authority are reversed: with S.H.I.E.L.D exposed as infiltrated and subverted by Hydra, not Nick Fury but Captain America is giving the orders.[72] At the same time the rationale behind the intelligence community's actions is questioned. Agent Romanov confirms that lying is integral to the intelligence community strategy, but Captain America represents honesty.[73] With that honesty he also denounces the surveillance measures and preventive violent actions taken against presumed future threats that are defended by the "realist" stance of Nick Fury (and also Pierce) in the second movie,[74] and positions himself against governmental regulation that requires the registration of superheroes in the third movie. Bucky, by contrast, needs to find his identity by remembering his past life and by making amends for his wrongs as the Winter Soldier, largely in the third movie.

Even though temporarily Captain America has to go against his social surroundings and existing institutions, in the end he has found his identity by defending his values and by saving what these institutions were originally meant for. He has worked not only for the *tikkun* of his soul but also for the *tikkun* of the world, and he finds his place in the latter again. Again the pivotal point of his identity is not solitary subjectivity but the ideal of a community of free people living together. His quest for identity is met not through inner self-constitution but by striving and working for a community founded on values and by finding his own place in that community. For Bucky, there is at least a chance that the *tikkun* of his soul and his efforts to right the wrongs of the past at long last also will provide him with his place in the present world, even if he chooses at the

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71    THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 0:21:00.
72    THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 1:32:14.
73    THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 1:10:50.
74    THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 0:17:43.

end of the third movie to be returned to cryogenic hibernation for the time being.

"Who am I?" and "Do I fit in?" – two questions that link Kabbalistic and Hasidic reflections about reincarnation with the temporal displacement of Captain America and Bucky. The answer is, "Be true to yourself and work for the betterment of the world – then you'll also fit in."

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**Ken Derry/Daniel White Hodge/Laurel Zwissler/
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# Bulletproof Love:
# LUKE CAGE (2016) and Religion

## ABSTRACT

There are many ways to think about religion and popular culture. One method is to ask where and when we see what might be commonly understood as "religious tradition(s)" explicitly on display. Another is to think about superhero narratives themselves as "religious", using this term as a conceptual tool for categorizing and thereby better understanding particular dimensions of human experience. This article takes a variety of approaches to understanding religion in relation to the recent television series LUKE CAGE (Netflix, US 2016). These approaches take their hermeneutical cues from a range of disciplines, including studies of the Bible; Hip Hop; gender; Black Theology; African American religion; and philosophy. The results of this analysis highlight the polysemic nature of popular culture in general, and of superhero stories in particular. Like religious traditions themselves, the show is complex and contradictory: it is both progressive and reactionary; emphasizes community and valorizes an individual; critiques and endorses Christianity; subverts and promotes violence. Depending on the questions asked, LUKE CAGE (2016) provides a range of very different answers.

## BIOGRAPHIES

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Jon Ivan Gill is an avid scholar of Whiteheadian process thought, metaphysics, cultural studies, aesthetics, existentialist philosophy, and constructive & secular theology. His creative tangent ranges from underground hip-hop culture to cryptic lyrics he pens in rap, poetry, journal refereeing, book reviews, and academic essays & critiques. He earned his PhD. candidate in "Philosophy of Religion and Theology" at Claremont Graduate University. Jon's staunch support of a truly philosophical and theological trans-disciplinary discourse involves the inclusion of everything from aesthetic atheism and religious pluralism to subversive use of the arts.

Annual conferences of large academic societies are typically, by their very nature, slow to respond to current events. The logistics in putting together such meetings are incredibly complex, the result being that the planning of sessions begins up to a year before the meeting takes place. To its credit, the American Academy of Religion (AAR) has been sensitive to this issue, and has endeavored to open up ways in which scholars can offer analyses of more recent phenomena. At the November 2016 meeting of the AAR in San Antonio, Texas, for example, several sessions were offered in response to the results of the U.S. presidential election that had taken place just slightly more than a week earlier.

With this sense of timeliness in mind, members of the AAR's Religion, Film, and Visual Culture (RFVC) group approached the director of the annual meeting, Dr. Robert Puckett, about scheduling a last-minute roundtable discussion of the first season of the superhero series Luke Cage (Netflix, US 2016), released in October 2016.[1] Not only is Luke the first Black superhero to be featured in his own comic book *and* his own television show, but the Netflix portrayal of him in a hoodie, being shot at by police (fig. 1), was clearly meant to resonate instantly with critically important, and deeply troubling, of-the-moment occurrences. He is, in the words of *Rolling Stone*'s Rob Sheffield, "the first Black Lives Matter superhero".[2]



Fig. 1: Film still, "DWYCK", Luke Cage (2016), S01/E09, 19:10.

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1    In this regard the authors would like to thank Dr. Syed Adnan Hussain (of St. Mary's University in Halifax), one of the members of the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture group, for the inspiration to propose this session.
2    Sheffield 2016.

Puckett, a self-proclaimed Marvel nerd, agreed to the session, which came to feature six scholars from several groups within the AAR in addition to RFVC: Anthropology of Religion; Black Theology; Critical Approaches to Hip-Hop and Religion; and Religion and Popular Culture. Many of the participants had never encountered one another before, and so the roundtable became an opportunity to cross disciplinary lines, to bring together a diverse range of voices and perspectives, and to meet some seriously excellent people.

The diversity of our roundtable panel fit well with one of our broad critical aims, which was to demonstrate that there are many ways to think about religion and popular culture. One starting point is to ask where and when we see what might be commonly understood as "religious tradition(s)" explicitly on display. Regarding superhero narratives, this question invites us to analyze ostensibly religious images and tropes in various media incarnations including comics, film, and television. Such analysis could include, for instance, identifying characters modeled on religious archetypes, such as Jewish messianic figures, Buddhist arhats, or Anishinaabe tricksters. It could also include allusions to religious texts such as the Qur'an, the Bhagavad Gita, or the Bible.

Another direction we might take would be to think about superhero narratives themselves as "religious" in some way. Following after theorists such as Jonathan Z. Smith, Talal Asad, and Tomoko Masuzawa, if we regard "religion" as a conceptual tool that scholars use to categorize and thereby better understand particular dimensions of human experience, we can begin to recognize the ways in which superhero narratives (and the worlds they create) may serve some of the functions typically reserved for "the religious".[3] This hermeneutic can illuminate aspects of such narratives that might otherwise go unnoticed.

This article takes a variety of approaches to understanding religion in relation to LUKE CAGE (2016). Doing so highlights the polysemic nature of popular culture in general, and of superhero stories in particular. Like religious traditions themselves, the show is complex and contradictory: it is both progressive and reactionary; emphasizes community and valorizes an individual; critiques and endorses Christianity; subverts and promotes violence. Depending on the questions you ask, LUKE CAGE (2016) provides many, many different answers.

## "SENSATIONAL ORIGIN ISSUE!"

The character of Luke Cage was created in 1972 by two white men, Archie Goodwin and John Romita, Sr., in the spirit of the Blaxpoitation films of the time. He first appeared in *Luke Cage, Hero For Hire* #1 (fig. 2), written by Goodwin and Roy Thomas, and drawn by George Tuska. Born Carl Lucas, Luke is framed by his old

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3    Smith 1982; see also Asad 1993; Masuzawa 2005.

friend Willis Stryker, ending up in Seagate Prison. He is tormented by a sadistic white guard, Albert "Billy Bob" Rackham, and volunteers for an experiment run by Dr. Noah Burstein in exchange for early release. Rackham sabotages the experiment in an effort to kill Carl, causing an explosion. But as is the way in comics, things go bizarrely awry – Rackham is killed instead and Carl emerges from the wreckage with super strength, breaking out of prison and changing his name to Luke Cage. Cautious about whom he can trust, he makes few close friends; an early one is Claire Temple, who helps Luke when he's hurt and who dates him for a while.

All of these details are repeated in the 13-episode Netflix series, which unlike the original comics was made by Black artists, including creator and showrunner Cheo Hodari Coker. Despite some of the big picture similarities to Luke's original incarnation, these artists made many changes to his character, bringing him into the 21st century and out of white stereotypes. He is much quieter, and more thoughtful and reserved; instead of shouting bombastically and punching supervillains, he reads books and eschews violence. Pointedly unlike his comic book self, the Netflix Luke refuses to be paid for helping people, preferring to earn his living as a janitor in Pop's barbershop. Changes were also made to his childhood: no longer raised in Harlem by a police-detective father, Luke is now from Georgia and the son of a philandering preacher. In the television show, therefore, he is an outsider in Harlem, working to help people he has only recently come to know and love. Claire, too, undergoes important shifts as her character is translated from the comics: she is now a Hispanic nurse, instead of a Black doctor (fig. 3).



Fig. 2 (l.): John Romita Sr., cover artwork, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* #1 (June 1972) © Marvel Comics.



Fig. 3 (r.): George Tuska, interior artwork, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* #2 (August 1972) © Marvel Comics.

The reasons why Harlem needs Luke's help are laid out in two main story arcs: the first seven episodes of the series focus on local gangster Cornell "Cottonmouth" Stokes and his cousin Mariah Dillard, a corrupt local councilwoman. Together they unsuccessfully attempt to recover first from the betrayal of an underling during a weapons deal with a rival gang, and then from the crippling damage that Luke inflicts on Cornell's organization. As Luke's vigilante activities against Harlem's criminal world gather steam, he finds himself the focus of a police investigation, led by Detective Misty Knight.

The second arc of the series begins when Mariah kills Cornell in a rage over his accusation that she "wanted" the sexual abuse she suffered as a young girl. At this point the mysterious "Diamondback" – Cornell's powerful unseen supplier – emerges from the shadows. He reveals himself to be Willis Stryker, who is not only Luke's childhood friend and betrayer but also, it turns out, his half-brother. During the final six episodes Mariah gradually steps into her dead cousin's crime-boss shoes, while Diamondback repeatedly tries to kill Luke for what he sees as the unforgiveable sin of being the publically "accepted" son, rather than the one whose origin was a shameful secret. Luke finally defeats a super-suited Diamondback in a street battle, and ends the series by giving himself up to the police as an escaped convict.

## "DISHWASHER LAZARUS"

Our consideration of religion and LUKE CAGE (2016) begins with this question: what kind of a hero is Luke? The second time that we see him use his powers, it is to protect a young boy when one of Cornell's henchmen, Tone, shoots up Pop's barbershop (E02; fig 4).[4] When the shooting is done, Luke does not charge out of the shop to punish the gunman; he instead stays to help the injured and check on Pop, who tragically has been killed. Much of LUKE CAGE (2016) focuses on the lead character's transformation from escaped convict to hero, as he is pushed and inspired by circumstances and people (particularly Pop and Claire Temple) to emerge from hiding and use his powers to help others. But even as this emergence takes place, Luke continues to help by shielding victims to *prevent* harm, as much as (if not more than) he hits villains to *inflict* harm: he stands in front of the injured corrupt police detective, Rafael Scarfe, when Cornell's men try to run him over (E06); he protects Misty from being shot during the hostage crisis at Harlem's Paradise (E10–11); and he covers a police officer with his body when that man's partner starts firing at Luke (fig. 1).

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4    All references to LUKE CAGE are to the first season of the series, which as of this writing is the only season that has aired.

Fig. 4: Film still, "Code of the Streets", LUKE CAGE (2016), S01/E02, 42:31.

There are other ways in which Luke submits to violence of different types, rather than leading with his fists. When his landlords are being threatened, he first asks the four men to stop being disrespectful, and then stands still while one of them hits Luke in the face and shatters his own hand (E01).[5] After Cornell threatens to expose Luke as a fugitive, he decides to leave Harlem, before Claire convinces him to stay and fight back (E07). He tells the two officers who stop him that he just wants to walk and mind his own business (E09). Despite his innocence he does not resist being taken back to prison at the end of the series (E13). Even during his climactic battle with Diamondback, who is wearing a suit that makes him at least as strong as Luke, he simply decides to stop trading blows: "I'm not doing this any more. . . . You want me dead? Then kill me" (E13).[6]

This is unusual behavior for a superhero. We are used to seeing these characters – despite their ostensive commitment to peace – embracing violence with much more enthusiasm than Luke does. As Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence have argued in several works,[7] superheroes most often embody a troubling perspective – derived originally from certain biblical responses to crisis – that they have termed "zealous nationalism".[8] This perspective is rooted in moral dualism, as a lone savior driven by a commitment to justice is faced with

5   This is in fact the first time that we see Luke's powers in action.
6   As it turns out Luke is employing a rope-a-dope strategy, letting Diamondback wear his suit out beating on him before being dispatched by our hero with three quick hits. Still, the fact is that Luke wins by submitting to violence.
7   See, e.g., Jewett/Lawrence 1977, 2002, 2003, and 2010.
8   For a concise account of both zealous nationalism and prophetic realism (which is discussed below), and the biblical origins of each perspective, see Jewett/Lawrence 2003, 44–54.

corrupt and/or ineffective laws and so becomes a vigilante in order to save the community by destroying the evildoers who threaten it.[9] There are some elements of this perspective in Luke Cage (2016), especially regarding problems with the police and Luke's justification for using violence to make Harlem safer.[10] But Luke never directly or even inadvertently kills anyone, and even after seeing Cornell let out of jail (E07) he still hands Diamondback over to the authorities when their fight is done (E13) – and, again, he gives *himself* up to the police in the end.

In many ways, in fact, Luke Cage (2016) appears to represent the opposing worldview – also biblically rooted – which Jewett and Lawrence refer to as "prophetic realism". Instead of wishing for a solitary hero who ignores the law to save everyone from evil, this perspective recognizes human complexity and valorizes communities working together to improve their situation using due process. This focus on community is evident throughout the series, from the importance of Pop's barbershop as a refuge and meeting place, to the fact that Luke has no mask or "superhero" identity: he is always Luke Cage and he openly helps, and often needs the help of, the people around him.[11] He also tries to *understand* the people who are hurting Harlem, and the series itself slowly peels off the masks of the villains – Cornell Stokes, Mariah Dillard, Willis Stryker – to show us the painful histories that have shaped their current identities and actions.[12]

9    Examples of American cinematic superheroes who embody zealous nationalism include the protagonists of Batman (Tim Burton, US 1989), Spider-Man (Sam Raimi, US 2002), Superman Returns (Bryan Singer, US 2006), Iron Man (Jon Favreau, US 2008), The Dark Knight Rises (Christopher Nolan, GB/US 2012), and Man of Steel (Zack Snyder, GB/US 2013).

10   In this regard one of the most zealous moments in the series comes after Pop's funeral (E05), when Misty is upbraiding Luke for antagonizing Cornell and saying that she will get him "the right way", that "the system will win". Luke is having none of it: "Forget the system. Arrests lead to indictments, and indictments lead to pleas. There's always a bigger fish. A bigger angle. A slap on the wrist. And boom. Right back in business. I ain't going for that." This conversation is an example of the wonderfully complex, shifting dynamics of Luke Cage (2016), given that Luke as noted below does end up trusting the "system" in several respects, while Misty moves further into vigilante territory: she attacks Claire during an official interrogation (E08) and circumvents police protocol when trying to protect a key witness against Mariah, which leads to the witness's death and Mariah's freedom (E13).

11   In his eulogy for Pop, Luke admits that he used to be "selfish" in his responses to violence, and that Pop taught him a critical lesson: "If we try to protect only ourselves, without looking out for those people closest to us, then we lose" (E05). He concludes the eulogy by affirming, "I don't believe in Harlem. I believe in the people who make Harlem what it is." This faith is returned at several points in the series, notably when many of Harlem's people put on hoodies with holes in them to help Luke evade the police, and when they all start chanting "Luke! Luke! Luke!" during his final fight with Diamondback (E13).

12   Pop too worked to understand the value and humanity of all people, regardless of their past. As Luke notes in his eulogy, "Pop saw the shine in everyone that walked into his barbershop. . . . He made them feel better about the world, and themselves. We have to strive on a daily basis to do the same for each other" (E05).

      The most striking way in which Luke Cage (2016) fails to do this very thing involves Willis Stryker, who is portrayed as cartoonishly evil. The attempt to understand his horrifying behavior is weak and unsatisfying; simply having a thoughtless and hypocritical father hardly accounts for Stryker's murderous rampages. And the parental indifference he experienced in no way comes close to the horrors

One other feature of Luke's character stands out as unique in a way that is connected to prophetic realism: his role as a Christ-figure. While a great many superheroes also symbolize Jesus, they do so while waving the flag of zealous nationalism. There are by no means any universally agreed parameters for identifying cinematic Christ-figures, but Lloyd Baugh's influential *Imaging the Divine* (1997) offers a useful starting point.[13] And while he does not even mention superheroes, almost all of his criteria are in fact part of standard superhero tropes: they are saviors with mysterious origins; they perform miracles; they suffer and bleed; they have devoted followers or helpers; and they are committed to justice, which often leads to conflicts with authorities. In addition many heroes are often scapegoated, and it has become increasingly common for them to die and resurrect, sometimes literally. In film the Christ-like nature of these (literal or figurative) deaths is often indicated by showing the hero in a crucifixion pose.[14]

Luke meets all of these Christ-figure criteria. Initially no one knows who he is or where he is from. He has miraculous strength and seems impervious to harm, although he suffers and bleeds when shot by the Judas bullet. He is helped by several people, including Pop, Claire, Misty, and (in a great cameo) Method Man. His sense of justice is what compels him to finally step out of the shadows to protect the community.[15] He struggles against several authorities including the police, Mariah, and Cornell. He is falsely accused of killing both Cornell and a police officer. He is not prone to crucifixion poses, although he possibly appears in one after he has been shot by Diamondback and is helped by Claire and Dr. Burstein, his arms across their shoulders (fig. 5). More directly, after his eulogy for Pop he is shown walking with a neon crucifix over his shoulder and a street lamp halo (fig. 6); during the opening a crucifix is projected onto Luke's back (fig. 8); and at the very end of the series, as Luke is being driven out of New York by the police, he passes by a brightly lit "Jesus Saves" cross (fig. 7). Finally, we see Luke "resurrected" at least twice: after Dr. Burstein's Seagate Prison

suffered by Cornell and Mariah, who are shown to us as infinitely more complex, conflicted, and interesting adults than Stryker. That said, to its credit the series remarkably does not end with the standard climactic/apocalyptic superhero battle between mimetic enemies. It certainly appears to be going in this direction, especially when the penultimate episode ends with Diamondback in a super-suit confronting his half-brother Luke. But this fight is actually quite brief and ends very near the start the final episode, leaving a great deal of time for people to simply have conversations about what is next for themselves, for others, and for the community.

13  The criteria for identifying Christ-figures listed in this paragraph come specifically from chapter six of Baugh's text ("Essential Dimensions and Typical Guises of the Christ-figure"). There are of course any number of criteria not mentioned by Baugh that could be used instead; see, e.g., Kozlovic 2004. Also, as noted below, many objections have been raised regarding the ways in which Christ-figures are generally identified and interpreted.

14  The one criterion mentioned by Baugh that appears least often in superhero films is prayer, although this is not unheard of (e.g., Superman's very Gethsemane-esque visit to a church in MAN OF STEEL [2013]). In keeping with this pattern, prayer is arguably the one Christ-figure requirement from Baugh's list that Luke does not clearly fulfill – although he does give a eulogy for Pop in a church (E05).

15  Referring to his role as the savior of Harlem, Angelica Jade Bastién (2016) says that she has come to think of Luke as "Hood Jesus".

experiment explodes, giving Luke his powers and leading everyone to think he is dead (E04);[16] and when he appears to actually die for a moment while being treated for the Judas wounds but is brought back to life when Claire throws a live electrical hot plate into the acid bath that contains him (E10).



Fig. 5: Film still, "DWYCK", Luke Cage (2016), S01/E09, 41:49.



Fig. 6: Film still, "Just to Get a Rep", Luke Cage (2016), S01/E05, 48:47.
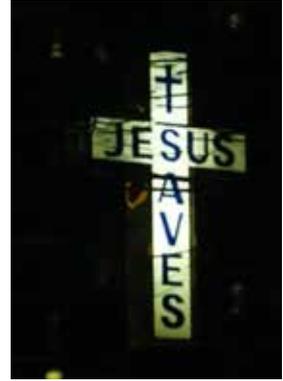


Fig. 7: Film still, "You Know My Steez", Luke Cage (2016), S01/E13, 43:35.
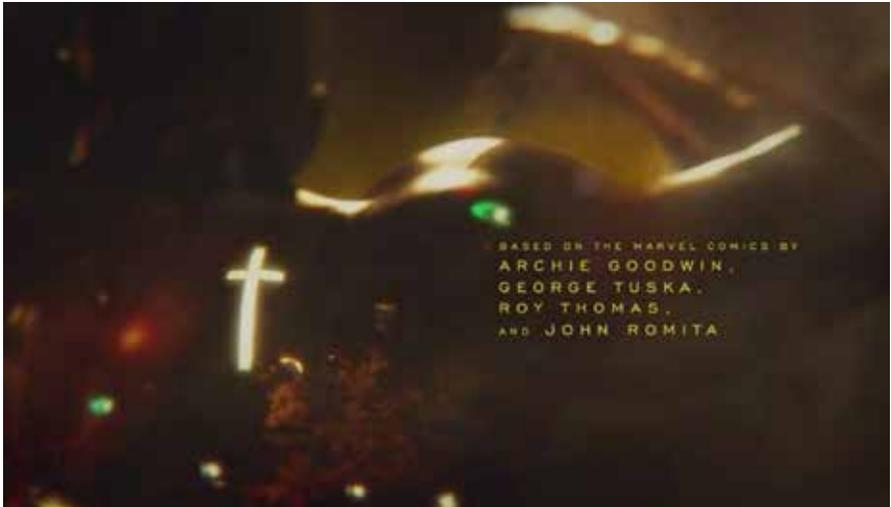


Fig. 8: Film still, opening credits, Luke Cage (2016).

16    This moment also represents the death of Carl Lucas as an identity. As Luke angrily tells Dr. Burstein after his post-Judas resurrection, "I'm Luke. Carl died at Seagate" (E10).

LUKE CAGE (2016) contains several other possible Christ-figure elements not mentioned by Baugh. Luke is poor,[17] and his submission to the police at the end is a "willing sacrifice".[18] He has a dual nature, "one fantastic and the other mundane",[19] beautifully captured by the name that Cornell gives him: "Dishwasher Lazarus" (E05). He is betrayed by a Judas-figure,[20] his old friend Willis Stryker who – in a move that is unbelievably on the nose – shoots Luke with the Judas bullets. As for Pop, in both his encouragement of Luke and his death he can be seen as analogous to John the Baptist, someone who "identifies and/or points the way to the Christ-figure, and fades away".[21] It is even possible to see Luke's hoodies as a gesture towards the "popular image of Jesus in his iconic white robes" (see fig. 9 and 10).[22]
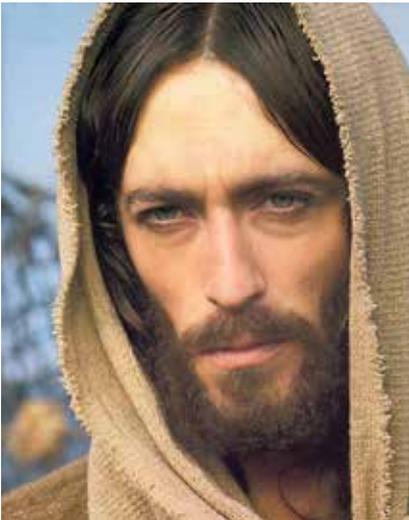


Fig. 9: Film still, JESUS OF NAZARETH (Franco Zeffirelli, GB/IT 1977).

Fig. 10: Film still, "Moment of Truth", LUKE CAGE (2016), S01/E01, 52:46.

And then, of course, the show several times goes out of its way to tell us directly that Luke is a Christ-figure. When he confronts Cornell after surviving the mis-

17  Kozlovic 2004, par. 61.
18  Kozlovic 2004, par. 51.
19  Kozlovic 2004, par. 33.
20  Kozlovic 2004, par. 40.
21  Kozlovic 2004, par. 43.
22  Kozlovic 2004, par. 63. The hoodie appears to evoke the image of Jesus specifically as shepherd, as taking care of others, which fits Luke's reference to Luke 4:18 (discussed below). In fact the first time he wears a hoodie in the series is also the first time he uses his powers, when he protects his landlords from Cornell's men (E01). When the fight is done, Mrs. Lin says that she wants to pay Luke to help them, and he replies, "I'm not for hire. But you have my word ma'am: I've got you." And then he pops his hood (fig. 10).

sile attack, he is advised to consider his next actions carefully: "[It] costs to be a savior. Ask Jesus" (E05). And when Shades tells Cornell about the Judas bullet, he points out, "If you wanted to kill Jesus, that's the bullet you'd use" (E05).[23]

As many critics have noted, simply labeling a character as a "Christ-figure" is not in itself all that meaningful, as it begs the question: "So what?"[24] In most superhero narratives, I would argue, presentation as a messiah is used to support the perspective of zealous nationalism. This perspective depends heavily on claiming the moral authority to decide who is good and who is evil; aligning your hero with Christ conceivably can do a good deal of work towards this end.[25] LUKE CAGE (2016), however, explicitly tells us that Luke will be a very different kind of savior when he recites Luke 4:18 and re-names himself after the gospel writer: "The spirit of the Lord is on me, because I have been anointed to preach good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind. To release the oppressed" (E04). Luke will thus be a savior more interested in helping people in need than in defeating evil. This is a much more down-to-earth mission, a more human mission, than we see in most superhero stories.

In this regard, while Luke is clearly special in many ways, the show also works to humanize him. This is evident in his fear of being recognized and sent back to jail, and his determination to earn a living with honest work, whether sweeping up hair, washing dishes, or tending bar. There is also the simple but important fact that he can be physically hurt: he is shot by Diamondback, he bleeds, he almost dies. When Cornell facetiously comments that people act as if Luke "can walk on water", Shades asks in all seriousness, "Can he?" (E07). This question, along with Mariah's suggestions for killing Luke – drowning, burning, poisoning (E06) – points to the vulnerabilities that he shares with the rest of humanity. This shared connection is movingly underscored when men in the community wear hoodies with holes in them, risking their own safety to

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23  See Campbell 2016 for a theological discussion of the ways in which Luke functions as a Christ-figure in comparison to Matt Murdock from DAREDEVIL (Netflix, US 2015, 2016). Campbell argues that each hero represents very different aspects of the Christian messiah's salvific role, with Matt as the suffering Jesus and Luke the risen Christ. He contrasts the fact that Matt's "body is broken time and time again for the sake of those he seeks to save" with the understanding that Luke is "indestructible": "Freed from death and physical pain, after his resurrection, Luke Cage is able to tackle oppression in Harlem fearlessly. Mostly." While Campbell makes many good points, his use of "mostly" here is, I would argue, an understatement. Unlike Daredevil, who is in fact called "the man without fear", Luke is filled with a great deal of anxiety – and (arguably) fear – about taking on oppression. And while he is certainly much less susceptible to physical harm than Matt Murdock, LUKE CAGE (2016) makes the point in several ways noted below that Luke is far from indestructible.

24  See, e.g., Deacy 2006; Derry 2012, 189–191; Jasper 1997; Lyden 2003, 24; Plate 2003, 158, 160 n. 12.

25  It is thus not surprising that most superhero films end with a huge, enormously destructive fight. The protagonist essentially becomes the savior figure of Revelation, triumphing in an apocalyptic battle against evil.

make it harder for the police to find and capture Luke (E12).[26] As he becomes us, in other words, we become him: ordinary/special, criminal/hero, human/divine: Dishwasher Lazarus.

## "WHO'S GONNA TAKE THE WEIGHT?"

The use of Hip Hop culture throughout LUKE CAGE (2016) is pervasive. From the soundtrack to the location of Luke's community, Hip Hop culture is prevalent and provides a foundational grounding for the series and for the character of Luke. His connection to the community, the father figure in Pop, the oversized picture of Biggie Smalls in Cornell's office, and the underground aura give LUKE CAGE (2016) a strong connection to a culture much larger than just its music.

As scholars have asserted, Hip Hop is much more than just music videos, lyrics, and "bling". [27] It is a culture by which those who have been disinherited can find identity, space, place, and being.[28] Moreover, Hip Hop is a contextual manufacturing of those oppressed and cast aside into DJing, rhythms, MCing, dance, language, street entrepreneurialism, street fashion, knowledge and spirituality.[29] Thus, LUKE CAGE (2016) and the themes within the first Black comic book hero present a reassertion of Black narrative and theology. LUKE CAGE (2016) is a secular articulation of the spiritual reimagined within a Hip Hop context and ethos. To that end, Luke takes on three of Hip Hop's theological concepts: (1) a theology of social action, (2) God of the profane, (3) a theology of community.[30]

Jon Michael Spencer's theomusicology provides a framework that allows us to better comprehend Luke's connection to Hip Hop, its culture, and its theology.[31] Theomusicology is defined as "a musicological method for theologizing about the sacred, the secular, and the profane, principally incorporating thought and method borrowed from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and philosophy".[32] It is, as Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Marlon Hall state, "Music as spiritual practice ... hear[ing] the challenges and evils in the church and the world

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26   A television news report on this community action highlights the iconic/religious significance of Luke's hoodie by referring to him as "The 'Hole-y' Hero" (E12).

27   Dyson 2001; Hodge 2009, 2010; Johnson 2013; Miller/Pinn 2015; Miller/Pinn/Freeman 2015.

28   Forman 2002, 173–211.

29   Hodge 2010, 42–43.

30   Hodge 2010, 73–187.

31   While the central premise of this framework focuses on music, I have expanded its use to also explore cultural phenomena within Black and city contexts along with adding symbolic imagery and cultural mores – all of which are a part of LUKE CAGE (2016).

32   Spencer 1991, 3.

as the music reveals."[33] Theomusicology is distinguished from other methods and disciplines such as ethnomusicology:[34]

> Its analysis stands on the presupposition that the religious symbols, myths, and canon of the culture being studied are the theomusicologist's authoritative/normative sources. For instance, while the Western music therapist would interpret the healing of the biblical patriarch Saul under the assuagement of David's lyre as a psychophysiological phenomena, the theomusicologist would *first* take into account the religious belief of the culture for whom the event had meaning. The theomusicological method is therefore one that allows for scientific analysis, but primarily within the limits of what is normative in the ethics, religion, or mythology of the community of believers being studied.[35]

The theomusicologist is thus concerned with multi-level data within the context of the people they study, and subsequently analyzes the material within the time, culture, and context in which it was created[36] – something that Luke Cage (2016) provides a particularly good space for, and precisely what is needed when examining Hip Hop culture within the series.

Luke is a hero suitable for the post–civil rights context[37] in which Hip Hop finds itself. His use of violence, often as a last resort as when protecting his landlords, is a just use of that force when seen through the Hip Hop lens of rules of engagement. In other words, force should be used only when necessary and to protect those whom you love.[38] In one sense, Luke focuses primarily on his own community to do the work of a hero – much unlike other superheroes who take on a more meta-savior role to "save the world" or to save humankind from some far-off evil. In Luke's sense, this far-off evil is present in the local and, with advice from Pop, can create a space for heroic measures.[39]

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33  Kirk-Duggan/Hall 2011, 77.

34  There is no universal or singular definition of ethnomusicology, as William Darity states; several words come to mind for ethnomusicology such as sound, music, performance, context, and culture. For some, it is the study of music in culture, or, more broadly, the study in context (Darity 2008, 20–22).

35  Spencer 1991, 3–4.

36  Theomusicology broadens the discussion of religion within Hip Hop contexts and asks the question "What is the Hip Hop community saying in the context in which the music, the art, the album, and the artist were created?"

37  This reference is to the generation of young adults born during the post-soul era (1980–2001), raised on a transmediated diet, disconnected from previous generations both locally and ideologically, and currently with non-binary issues to contend with in a post-9/11 society and living in Western society. This generation does not have the binary issues to contend with that the Civil Rights generation did (e.g. more Blacks in leadership or the right to vote). While those issues are still present, they manifest themselves in a matrix of problems, which involve police brutality, sexuality, sexual orientation, socio-economics, transgender, class, and race.

38  Hodge 2017, 116–148.

39  I would note that there is still a strong patriarchal feel within Luke Cage (2016), and that this continues to be one of Hip Hop's major flaws. Gender and sexuality tend to favor men and heteronormative standards, leaving little to no room for LGBTQ and other variances to that norm. In this regard even

When interpreting a character like Luke in terms of religion and Hip Hop, we might consider three guiding categories:

1) The Sacred: not only for those elements within a society that are set apart, and forbidden, for ritual, but also for those elements within the given society and culture that aspire for both the adoption of a pious stance and the search for deity.

2) The Secular: for those items designated by a given society and culture as having little to no connection with a form of deity.

3) The Profane: for those areas in a society labeled or designated outside given morals, codes, ethics, and values established as "good" and/or "right" by the society and culture being studied.

With these understandings in mind, we can see Luke as a sacred, secular, and profane hero. An example of this trinary perspective is provided when he speaks at Pop's funeral (E05; fig. 11). Luke is in a conventionally sacred space, a church,



Fig. 11: Film still, "Just to Get a Rep", Luke Cage (2016), S01/E05, 44:46.

in front of a sign that connotes transcendence. But while he is the son of a minister, he himself is not ordained; he is as secular as his suit, and a key part of the message he delivers in this moment is very much about *this* world, about the community of Harlem. The profane is all that Luke embodies of the streets and his invoking of violence for good, his secular jacket covering the profane bullet holes in his shirt. The angle of this shot also suggests that Luke commands re-

though Luke's use of his power is communal, he is still cis gendered and attracted to women, as in the case with his sexual encounters with Misty.

spect and those who follow must listen; the subtext could mean he possesses something of deity himself, rooted in the sacred, secular, and profane.

The notion of a secular, sacred, and profane hero is not a foreign concept for those within the Hip Hop community. Heroes come in all forms, shapes, genders, and sizes. Take Biggie, for example, a hero who embodied an apotheosis approach to God and faith, yet was in all manner still "secular" and "profane". For the Hip Hop community, the good outweighs the bad, and Biggie is representative of an ongoing debate about God's connection to pimps, thugs, baby-mammas, and "niggas". Biggie provided that sacred, secular, profane connection to God and re-articulated it in his music, poetry, and work with his community. Someone like Luke is that conduit as well, as a person able to utilize their context and to begin to create a "better way" without using conventional methods.

The Hip Hop community regularly experiences violence, death, nihilism, and war-like conditions. One might argue that this reality is at the center of most of Hip Hop's social critique of dominant societal structures and systems. Equality, justice, fairness, impartiality in the law, and a social voice is where many Hip Hoppers – especially the underground community in which Luke finds himself – push towards and to which they give a lot of their energy. Thus, Luke, a reluctant hero at first and not originally from Harlem, roots himself into his space and place and rises to give that voice back to the community. This arc fits well with a messianic narrative or a Hip Hop Jesuz that The Outlawz or even Kendrick Lamar describes. Luke is not too perfect, not too saintly, not too connected to divinity; a hero that the post-civil rights Hip Hopper can connect with and to. "Luke" is the answer to the question posed by the title of the Gang Starr track (and of episode 3), "Who's Gonna Take the Weight?" This is worthy of notice and, especially in the image of a strong Black man in Luke, something that is much more complex than just all good or all evil.

## "THAT'S THE LAST TIME YOU WILL EVER CALL ME A BITCH."

Constructions of masculinity and femininity inevitably implicate each other. When we approach any discussion of gender and sexuality, intersectional theory, formulated by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw[40] and further championed by Patricia Hill Collins,[41] is crucial. It becomes even more crucial when we consider gender in a series like LUKE CAGE (2016), which actively wrestles with race and class stereotypes, often using Christian tropes to do so. The characters struggle within a context that bell hooks has named "imperialist white-

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40   Crenshaw 1989 and 2012.
41   Collins 1990, 2013, and 2014.

supremacist capitalist patriarchy".[42] That is, the show is not just about race, not just about gender, but is about these identity markers as interconnected ways of distributing power within our social context, in combination with religion, sexuality, material dis/advantage, etc. Characters' responses to their histories of violence flow down gendered lines. This section highlights three themes: absent parents, that is, a lack of constructive gender models; sex; and the relationship of gender to power.

From the beginning of the series, the issue of absent parents surfaces. As Pop is explaining why it is important to create a safe space for the young men of the neighborhood, Luke says, "Everyone has a gun, no one has a father" (E01). The link between a lack of positive male role models and community violence is made explicit. Pop's approach to the boys of the neighborhood also reflects what Patricia Hill Collins has called "other-mothering",[43] the practice, common in stressed communities, of "taking in strays", taking responsibility for under-parented or neglected children and integrating them into non-biological kin networks. This practice is something we see not only with Pop, but also with Mama Mabel and then Mariah (E07).

Here begins a gendered split between the constructed parenting provided by Pop and that provided by Mama Mabel. Pop, on one hand, gives emotional support and mentoring, consciously creating sanctuary space free from violence. Mabel, on the other hand, brings abandoned children, Cornell and Mariah, into her world of hustle and violence. Mariah further takes on the role of "other mother" to Cornell. Though she tries to provide him with a kind of care different from that provided to them by Mabel, in the end, she cannot help but reproduce the violence of her past, bringing death rather than life. This parallels the role she plays for her neighborhood: her dream is to uplift, but in the end she cannot help but consume.

Mariah's collapse into devouring mother connects to the series' meditations on sexual violence. Even in episode one, Luke assists a co-worker, Candace, who is uncomfortable serving the VIP room alone, for fear of harassment or assault. The show acknowledges sexual violence as one of the multifaceted forms of violence it addresses, one that swirls around with and refracts other forms of violence, including structural violence. When Misty is speaking with a counselor after her attack on Claire (E08), he suggests that she needs to acknowledge her adolescent guilt over the murder of her cousin, who was abducted and raped (E09). In juxtaposing the exploitation and destruction of this body – young, black, and female, characteristics interpreted by her assailants and by the police as evidence of its disposability[44] – Misty's narrative offers a contrast with Luke's

42   hooks 2004, 29.
43   Collins 1995.
44   See Crenshaw 1991, especially 1266–1271.

invulnerable body. However, this contrast also highlights that while vulnerability to physical and structural violence is shared across disadvantaged communities of color, it affects men and women in different ways.

There is also the tragedy and complexity of Mariah's childhood sexual abuse, for which Cornell ultimately pays. Her crazed reaction to Cornell's accusation that she "wanted it" is multivalent (E07). On one hand, her powerful denial of the accusation offers a clear demonstration of how inaccurate and self-serving the cultural commonplace of blaming victims is. On the other hand, her actions afterward also reinforce the stereotype that abused women are crazy and dangerous.[45] Further, her character arc does not challenge the trope, fodder for exploitation films galore, that requires that women be raped before they are socially sanctioned or morally excused for mobilizing their own power as physical violence. Finally, there is also the last scene with Shades, who has just fallen in love with Mariah as a result of her violence, when she echoes her words to Cornell, "I did not want this", and Shades replies, "I think you did." What do we do with the juxtapositions that such an assault narrative provides in the context of rape culture?



Fig. 12: Mariah ascending. Film still, "You Know My Steez", Luke Cage (2016), S01/E13, 42:08.

Any discussion of sexuality in Luke Cage (2016) must consider the forms of sexuality that are visible and those that are invisible. It is not difficult to take a queer reading to the relationship between Luke and Cornell.[46] They are both

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45  Merry 2008; Levy 2008.
46  On queer theory and the academic study of religion, see Wilcox 2012.

as smooth as protagonists from seventies' soul cinema, showing each other up, engaging in repartee parallel to that between Luke and the major female characters, and vying for the soul of their fictional Harlem. Through the male-desiring gaze, they can be read as competing suitors, the tragically Luciferian Cornell and the reluctantly messianic Luke, but also, therefore, as completing each other.

The homoeroticism between the two must remain subtext, however. This message is reinforced by the continued rhetorical use of the term "bitch" as an insult for men, angrily ascribed, for example, not only by Cornell (E01), but also by Misty (E07) and Turk (E12). The word's repression specifically of women is symbolically subverted by the clear inclusion in the series of powerful women, is made light of when Claire successfully recovers her bag from a mugger, and is explicitly challenged when Mariah tells Shades, "That's the last time you will ever call me a bitch" (E08). Yet the word's specifically homophobic power is never challenged, whether subtly or directly, as it would be by the visible presence of openly LGBTQ characters.

The foreclosure of latent desire between Cornell and Luke comes not only as Cornell is removed, but also with the simultaneous arrival of Diamondback, with his Old Testament rules and punishments. An erotically charged story of rival Brothers is overwritten with a literal one of rival brothers, explicitly presented in the show as a Cain and Abel story. However, behind this story of hate and fratricide is also an Isaac and Ishmael story, sons of the same man by different women. As Delores Williams has deftly demonstrated, peering behind the androcentric and patriarchal narrative actually gets us to a story of two women, mothers to sons from the same man, that is, to the shadows of Hagar and Sarah.[47] In Williams' analysis, Hagar's story is the story of African American women's historical experience. Hagar's appearance here only as back-story in the conflict between two powerful men is consistent with the historical androcentrism of Christianity, shared by the Black Church, that Womanist theologians such as Williams deconstruct. Predictably then, the shadow mothers also set up some "yo mama" insults (E13).

Finally, consideration of gender and sexuality in the series would be incomplete without a meta-view about the place of the show in its broader social context. The series features numerous significant roles for people of color and, more specifically, for women of color. In a media landscape in which roles for actors of color are often both deliberately and unconsciously limited,[48] LUKE

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47   Williams 1993.
48   I am thinking here of critiques of "white washing" characters as other media forms are adapted to film, of the marketing concern that more than one significant character of color will pigeon-hole a show (e.g., as dramatized in "Indians on TV", MASTER OF NONE [Netflix, US 2015], S01/E04), and of the lack of recognition for actors of color who do manage, in spite of systemic racism, to land important roles (#OscarsSoWhite).

Cage (2016) provides an important exception. It is resplendent with beautiful women of color, of various ages, whose characters represent different avenues of agency, empowerment, and choice, even if the writing does not always do them justice.[49] It is also refreshing that sexuality is represented as a normal part of adult life; the series skips the cheap will-they/won't-they plot points; Misty and Claire don't have to compete over a man, but instead come to admire each other through cooperation in the trenches. Further, while the series attends to sexual violence, as discussed above, it is significant that the sexual encounters actually depicted on-screen are consensual, in great contrast to many competing series, though consistent with Jessica Jones (Netflix, US 2015), which introduced Luke's character.

## "I'M NOT A MONSTER."

In the tenth episode of Luke Cage (2016), Luke reenters the acidic waters of baptism whence his salvation comes (E10). Luke undergoes his initial baptism as a scientific experiment at Seagate Prison (E04; fig. 13). He dies as Carl Lucas and becomes a new creature. When Claire confronts Dr. Burstein for transforming Luke Cage, he responds, "I … I'm not a monster (E10)." Burstein's response offers a crucial point of departure for evaluating the theological significance of Luke Cage (2016). Indeed Dr. ~~Frankenstein~~ Burstein and his creation confront us with an interesting paradox. Who is the monster?
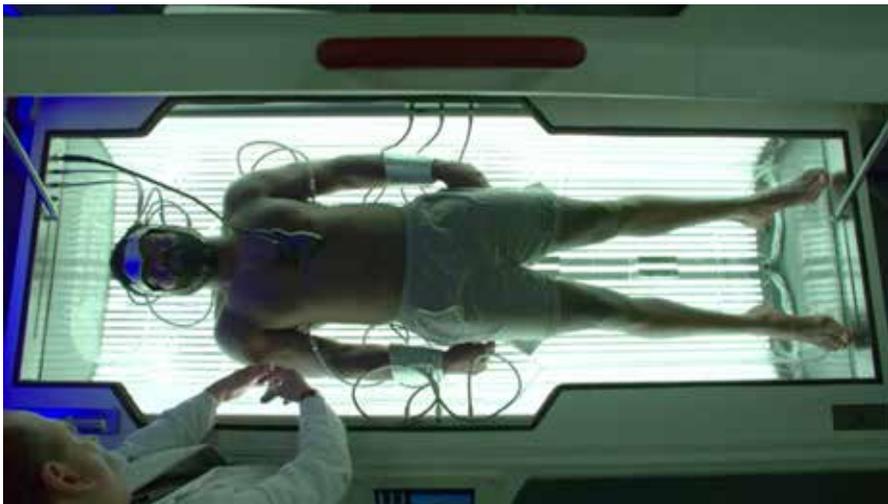


Fig. 13: Baptism/rebirth. Film still, "Step in the Arena," Luke Cage (2016), S01/E04, 39:34.

49  Bastién 2016.

Luke Cage (2016) opens us up to a particular moment in the United States and elsewhere when militarism, racism, and economic exploitation have crippled Black and Brown lives. The show invites theological reflection and interrogation because of its themes of freedom, art, and humanity. Black Theology and Womanist Theology offer unique vantage points for engaging Luke Cage methodologically. Because both theologies are grounded in the reality of Black lives, these theological frameworks are relevant in regard to Luke and the Harlem community. For James Cone, the parent of Black Liberation Theology, Black experience, Black history, Black culture, revelation, scripture, and tradition encompass the sources for Black Theology.[50] Concern for the community and liberation in light of Jesus' gospel guides the theological norm or hermeneutical principle in Black Theology. Womanist theology concerns itself primarily with the liberation of Black women and the family, establishing a positive quality of life for women and the family, and forming political alliances with other marginal groups struggling to be free of the oppression imposed by white-controlled American institutions.[51]

For understanding the concept of a monster, James Baldwin is useful. In the documentary Take this Hammer (Richard Moore, US 1963), Baldwin says, "I'm not describing you when I talk about you. I'm describing me . . . We invented the nigger. I didn't invent it. White people invented it." Baldwin articulates that the creation of the monster (nigger) emerged from white supremacist fears imposed on Blacks. In *Democracy Matters*, Cornel West describes niggerization as the act of American terrorism on Black people, treating them as niggers for over 350 years, making them "feel unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated".[52] Like the Tuskegee syphilis experiments in the late 20th century, Dr. Burstein takes Luke's Black body without any concern for his humanity. Burstein objectifies Luke into a thing that can benefit U.S. imperialism and militarism.

For centuries, the white gaze has invented slaves, Sambos, welfare queens, Jezebels, Hulks, and even animals out of Black bodies. These catastrophic misnomers are made possible by what Emilie Townes calls "the fantastic hegemonic imagination". Townes says, "The fantastic hegemonic imagination traffics in peoples' lives that are caricatured or pillaged so that the imagination that creates the fantastic can control the world in its image."[53] In this way, we may understand Luke Cage's impenetrable Black body as a result of white supremacist fantastic hegemonic imagination. The creation of Luke Cage emerges from the imagination of Dr. Burstein and not from Luke himself. Luke's impenetrable

50  Cone 2010 [1970], 24–35.
51  Williams 1994, 53.
52  West 2004, 20.
53  Townes 2006, 21.

body raises questions about how the United States sees itself concerning Black bodies. Does the United States understand itself to be impenetrable like Luke because of its military power? Does fear within the psyche of the white gaze perpetuate police brutality, harsh punishment, and the disproportionate imprisonment of Black bodies in the prison-industrial-complex due to false conceptions of the Black body? Who is the monster?

In *The Future of Ethics*, Willis Jenkins articulates the ways in which the earth is connected to women's bodies.[54] In particular, Jenkins evokes Womanist voices to demonstrate how earth's vulnerability relates to the vulnerability of women. The penetrable bodies of women in LUKE CAGE (2016) – of Candace, Mariah, and Misty's cousin – contrast with Luke's normally impenetrable male body. When Luke too is pierced, his insides ravaged by the Judas bullets, this gender distinction breaks down somewhat. Jenkins also helps us to go beyond the binary of female/male, as well as that of human/non-human, considering *all* those who are susceptible to harm. In this regard we remember that the United States continues to assert its imperial self not only through patriarchy and racism, not only through war and colonialism, but also through fracking, polluting, razing, and drilling.

What is Luke's response to his tragic condition and paradoxical self? He answers the niggerization imposed on his body like Emmett Till's mother, who responded to the murder of her 14-year-old son by saying, "I don't have a minute to hate. I'll pursue justice for the rest of my life."[55] Out of love, Baldwin tells his nephew that he does not have to confine himself to the definitions of the white world. With these two formulations, we may understand Luke Cage's pursuing love and justice as a response to the various cages in which he exists. When Luke chooses his name, he quotes Luke 4:18 (E04), a central text in Black Theology. In regards to Luke 4:18, Cone says, "Jesus' work is essentially one of liberation."[56] Like the Jesus of Black Liberation Theology, Luke Cage is anointed to bring liberty to the oppressed. As Jesus enters the human condition of those who experience systemic violence, Luke steps into the experience of those who are economically exploited, those who encounter police brutality, and those who encounter gang violence.

When two police officers stop Luke, many viewers may have people in mind like Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Renisha McBride, Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, and many others. Police inquiries have resulted in the deaths of too many Black and Brown people in the United States. However, the scene presents liberative tones when the bullets bounce off Luke (E07). This scene is very similar to Kendrick Lamar's music video ALRIGHT (Colin Tilley, US 2015), where Kendrick's body

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54   Jenkins 2013.
55   West 2004, 21.
56   Cone 1997 [1969], 35.

levitates against the gravity of state-sanctioned violence. Even in the face of the monstrosity of police brutality, Luke shields the one police officer from the bullets of the other. He demonstrates a central claim in the thought of Baldwin and Black Theology – the liberation of the oppressed is tied to the liberation of the oppressor.

## "NO ONE CAN CAGE A MAN IF HE TRULY WANTS TO BE FREE!"

In his brief yet influential introduction to the subject, Eddie S. Glaude Jr. argues that if "African American religion" is to have any analytical purchase, it must mean more than simply the religious life of people who happen to be Black. He insists, instead, that we understand it as a religious formation that "emerges in the encounter between faith, in all its complexity, and white supremacy".[57] African American religion responds to the political and social context of the United States in three ways. It represents a "*sign of difference*", insofar as it "explicitly rejects, as best as possible, the idolatry of white supremacy". African American religion operates as a "*practice of freedom*", wherein the "black religious imagination is used in the service of opening up spaces closed down by white supremacy". And it "insists on its *open-ended orientation*", meaning "African American religion offers resources for African Americans to imagine themselves beyond the constraints of now".[58]

We have already seen the ways in which Luke Cage, our "dishwasher Lazarus", stands as a *sign of difference* with regard to the traditional superhero story. If we take the archetypal comic book superhero who doles out violence in his (or occasionally her) quest to redeem the masses as an embodiment of the white savior – the figure who takes up the white wo/man's burden to save those who cannot save themselves – then we can read Luke Cage's reluctance to do harm and commitment to protecting the vulnerable as a rejection of one logic of white supremacy.

To this sign of difference we can add that the show opens up spaces closed down by white supremacy by reclaiming the image of the Black man in a hoodie which figures so prominently in the racist fantasies of the collective American subconscious in recent memory. Cheo Hodari Coker, the show's creator, brought to life a bulletproof Black man who shields other Black and Brown bodies from harm at a time when for viewers of color their bodies are as vulnerable as they have ever been. Nothing is more indicative of the show's birth in the Black Lives Matter moment than Coker's choice to dress Luke Cage in an array

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57   Glaude 2014, 6.
58   Glaude 2014, 11–12 (emphases in the original).

of hoodies. Here Coker directly intervenes in the demonization and criminalization of Black bodies. Responding to the grim reality that a hoodie could, in the eyes of a vigilante like George Zimmerman, condemn Trayvon Martin to death, Coker reclaims the hoodie and opens an imaginative space wherein "heroes could wear hoodies, too".[59]

In many respects LUKE CAGE (2016) can also be understood as a *practice of freedom*. This is, after all, the meaning behind the titular character's name. Freedom is a central theme of the show, which is oriented around the wrongful conviction of a man who has escaped from prison. "No one can *cage* a man if he truly wants to be free", Luke states as he explains his adopted surname (E04). He demonstrates this ideal repeatedly as he escapes an impressive array of both figurative and literal confinements, including Seagate Prison, his father's low expectations, his own fears and anxieties, and the rubble that he is buried under when Cornell shoots him with a missile (E03–04; fig. 14). As for "Luke", he takes his first name from the gospel where Jesus proclaims he has come to "preach good news to the poor … freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind" (E04, Luke 4:18).



Fig. 14: Luke's fist breaks free of the rubble *and* symbolizes solidarity with Black liberation movements. Film still, "Step in the Arena", LUKE CAGE (2016), S01/E04, 44:10.

Nowhere does the show exemplify the features of African American religion more poignantly than in its *open-ended orientation*. LUKE CAGE (2016) achieves something that has long remained a defining feature of African American religion: the creation of an imaginative space in and through which Black people can conjure worlds beyond the violence and degradation of daily life in a racist

59   Kim/Shifflet, 2016.

society. David Walker prophesied that God would wipe white supremacy off the face of the earth in wrath. The Exodus story of slaves set free by plagues and the parting of seas served as the mythic model for the liberation of the enslaved in the South and, later, for a second Exodus out of Jim Crow in the Great Migrations. Martin Luther King Jr. insisted that African Americans "as a people will get to the Promised Land", even if he also admitted, on the eve of his assassination no less, that he might "not get there with you".[60] And LUKE CAGE (2016) brings a world into being where a Black man in a hoodie is impervious to the bullets of police officers and gangsters alike, where that hoodied hero unites his beloved community (Harlem) against the death-dealers set out to destroy them from without and within.

Coker characterizes this open-ended orientation as a sort of wish fulfillment, noting "superheroes to a certain extent are always wish fulfillment".[61] Another way to think about the show, though, would be as an example of what Robin D. G. Kelley calls "freedom dreams". Reflecting on the significance of the imagination in the Black radical tradition, Kelley quips, "call me utopian, but I inherited my mother's belief that the map to a new world is in the imagination, in what we see in our third eyes rather than in the desolation that surrounds us".[62] When we view LUKE CAGE (2016) through the lens of African American religion, we begin to see the ways in which Black superhero narratives can function *as* religion, especially in the present moment when one must insist that Black lives matter in the face of a society that too often insists otherwise.

## "ALWAYS FORWARD, FORWARD ALWAYS."

The content of LUKE CAGE (2016) demonstrates what one could call an "ultimate concern" in the Tillichian sense. It looks through the unconditional aspects of the existential situation of the context within which it is situated and subtly and overtly voices the situation through summarizing its multiplicity into themes/questions/problems that can be addressed.[63] In other words, we enter into the dynamic social, political, economic, racial, and other dilemmas of the New York City where the story is set without an explanation of those problems as problems, but with a Heideggerian "thrownness" right in the middle of the "action" from which the concerns that need to be addressed emanate.[64]

Luke Cage's role in this context is one of synthesis: he embodies the ultimate concern as displayed in the whole of the fucked-up situation manifested

60   King 1991 [1968], 286.
61   Kim/Shifflet, 2016.
62   Kelley 2002, 2–3.
63   Tillich 1951, 10–11.
64   Heidegger 1996 [1927], 127.

in the struggle that ensues between Cornell and the drug kingpin Colon (E01), the political maneuvering of Mariah as a disguise for her own balancing act between the legal and the illegal for personal benefit (E01), and the campaign of extortion of local businesses executed by both Cornell and Mariah (E03). In the embodiment and synthesis of this multiplicity, Luke Cage becomes a God in the Whiteheadian sense, a deity that is both involved with and affected by temporal processes. He does not create an answer ex nihilo, but takes the jagged bricks of his context and theopoetically makes a house of liberation in which Harlem residents "relocate" and experience a transformation of their understanding of themselves, their worth, and their potential for greatness, even in the midst of the multifaceted oppression plaguing them.[65] In the words of Jerome Stone, this might be thought of as "minimalist transcendence", a humanistic response/intervention that replaces the need for a divine response, or at least the affirmation that transcendence described in this way is more logically defendable due to an empirical experience and location of such transformation.[66] Luke represents the "creative transformation" that John Cobb describes as "the call forward",[67] a notion echoed by Pop's sacred mantra/dying words: "always forward" (E02).

One of the most interesting themes of LUKE CAGE (2016) that goes largely unstated is that of the "world within a world". The Harlem as presented has autonomous existence in the way that Indigenous communities in North America have a sort of sovereignty: it is dependent on the world from which it comes in a peripheral way, yet operates on its own rules. It has its presidents and its pawns, its members with social capital and those without. This is Whiteheadian interconnectivity. The parent world's racism, poverty, classism, sexism, and other deities of white supremacy that converge in the "event" of Harlem all play a role in how Harlem functions.[68] But the blatant existence of this parent world and its diseases are rarely made explicitly evident. One key example is Cornell's identification of what in his exegesis is the curse/blessing of the underestimation of Afro-diasporic individuals in the parent world of the United States in his statement, "It's easy to underestimate a nigga. You never see them coming" (E01). Another is the recurring appeal to literary works written by people of Afro-diasporic descent born in the United States as a source/instance of reclamation of identity, such as those of Langston Hughes and Walter Mosley (E01). The liberation strategy here is processual, emphasizing in glimpses how the humanistic wise use of the thematic background of a

65   Whitehead 1978 [1929], 346.
66   Stone 1992, 109–110.
67   Coleman 2008, 87.
68   Massumi 2009, 5–6.

context (even the background that is virtually inaccessible) can set a brighter future for even the darkest situation.[69]

Another theme of the series is "Switzerland", or Pop's Barber Shop. In this rhizomic meeting place, the hierarchical tensions of key influential people in the Harlem World become nonfactors, as all who enter this shrine of the barbershop lose the stance of competitor and become colleagues. This is not the cancellation of difference, but the acceptance of the contrast of multiplicity, so that difference is not solved but courageously engaged within this beautiful mess, this chaosmos, many times uncomfortably (E02). The role of space is important in LUKE CAGE (2016) as a process liberation philosophy, for Switzerland is a freeze frame of the moment of decision. In Switzerland, there are no decisions but only possibility. In Switzerland, entities are presented with choices that could lead to their progressive liberation if they enact them outside the Harlem World. Pop's Barber Shop is a prime liberating thematic instance of the secular transcendence that Afred North Whitehead alludes to and Jerome Stone clearly spells out.[70]

The pinnacle of this liberating process/secular transcendence unearthed by Luke Cage is the notion of secular Gods that shows up in the background of the series, sometimes literally. There are allusions to the transcendent Gods of classical Christian theism, such as the funeral service for Pop (E05) and the biblical recitations of Luke's nemesis Diamondback (E08). But either these are figureheads which symbolize empty religiosity or they use religion subversively, even perversely. These Gods, in other words, are dead.[71] The "true religion" of the Harlem World of LUKE CAGE (2016) lies elsewhere. You don't get much more religious than having a picture of the Notorious B.I.G. on your wall as the focal point of honor. The MCs are some of the Gods of Harlem, along with the drug lords. These are the people who many of the residents of the city – like Shameek, done in by hubris and Cornells's fists – aspire to be. They set the tone of the town. So does Luke Cage. While the drug lords take the position of disconnected coercion to influence Harlem, Luke presents a different way of life that is interconnected persuasion. In the poetry of his Godhood, he takes the vileness of the world and creatively transforms it to a beautiful mess that influences the dwellers of Harlem to follow his modest whispers of liberation, whispers infused with a contagious renewed sense of hope and power.[72]

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69  Whitehead 1967 [1933], 256–257.
70  Stone 1992, 109–110.
71  Nietzsche 2007 [1882], 71–72.
72  Walker 2004, 59–60, 62, 69–71.

Fig. 15: Conflicting theologies: Shameek swaggers, Luke sweeps. Film still, "Moment of Truth", Luke Cage (2016), S01/E01, 02:57.

## "DO WHAT YOU CAN, KID."

So where does all this get us? What is the point of this shared rumination on Luke Cage (2016), which is, in the end, just a Netflix series based on some comic books? Why should scholars of religion care? Why should anyone care?

Circling back to Jonathan Z. Smith, he has theorized religion as a way of envisioning how the world should be, in contrast to how it is, and acting out ways to reconcile that gap.[73] Creating a show, watching its episodes, participating in its fan culture, even ragging on it through criticism can be analyzed as part of this practice. After all, disappointment only makes sense in comparison to a better what-could-be. In a sense this idea speaks to the tension within the concept of the superhero itself: it is an imperfect response to the problems of the world in which we live, the envisioning of a solution that is not only impossible but also itself problematic. In the words of Method Man as he concludes his ode to Luke, "Bulletproof Love": "People say we don't need another hero, but now we got one" (E12).

Our initial roundtable discussion and this ensuing article analyze, and ultimately contribute to, the meta-process of a culture reflecting on itself through its own products. We are excited about working in collaboration to allow for a richer sense of context than any of our individual approaches to Luke Cage (2016) could provide on its own. Rather than a single scholarly take, this article

73 Smith 1987.

is intended to provide a kaleidoscope of different perspectives, each lens allowing us to see new pieces and shifting our vision of the whole.



Fig. 16: Misty tries to see the whole picture. Film still, "Manifest", Luke Cage (2016), S01/E07, 10:45.

The sections of this article share what can be read in Smith's formulation as a dialectic of hope and disappointment. In its conscious engagements, the show has potential to offer subversive alternatives to the expected messages of mainstream entertainment. Luke is a more thoughtful, more human Christ-figure than usually found within superhero narratives, yet the genre's default to purifying violence ultimately proves impossible to completely escape. The series introduces not one, but several compelling characters who are women of color, but also at times disempowers them in conventional and therefore perplexing ways. The image of a righteous Black man in a hoodie, immune to bullets, is a Messianic dream in this moment in which "Black Lives Matter" is a supposedly controversial statement. Yet the image can also be twisted into white-supremacist sadism. The Harlem of the show represents an autonomous alterity, but does so by appropriating a real, thriving African American community into a fictional vision largely of deprivation. There are so many ways that the show is invigorating, entertaining, and inspiring and so many ways in which it inevitably falls short. Discussing together is part of the way we reconcile the gap.

Tracing religious elements within the show, putting the series in relationship to cultural phenomena with which it is in dialogue, and considering its trajectories of influence demonstrate that Luke Cage (2016) wrestles with some of the

major issues of our cultural moment – racism, violence, sexuality, and power – issues with which, as scholars of religion, we must also engage. In the end, there is no single answer or meaning. The show is multivalent, as are the best scholarly conversations.

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# Open Section

Michael R. Heim

# Bridging Real and Virtual: A Spiritual Challenge

## ABSTRACT

The question of how to bridge virtuality and reality intensified in 2016 with the release of several consumer products. The article begins by reviewing two anxieties about virtual reality raised at a 1999 conference. To address these anxieties, the paper draws on post-Jungian archetypal psychology (James Hillman, Thomas Moore) and the retrieval of Renaissance theology (Marsilio Ficino). Two experiences with Samsung Gear VR then illustrate how classic archetypal elements can contribute to active procedures for bridging the virtual and the real.

## KEYWORDS

VR spirituality, constructivist metaphysics, virtual architecture, immersive media, perceptual elements, archetypal psychology, 3-D dwellings, Samsung Gear VR

## BIOGRAPHY

Michael Heim is the author of several books on the ontology of virtual environments (amongst them the pioneering The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality, 1993 and Virtual Realism, 1998). He is lecturer at the Mount St. Mary's College, Los Angeles.

## THE CURRENT SITUATION

In the 1990s, Virtual Reality (VR) was a fantasy experiment among a small group of imagineers. The VR headset was a rare clunky device used by artists and experimenters. In 2015, the headset appeared in several products on the consumer market, and by 2016, it had become widespread. Thousands of headsets now function in a wide variety of contexts. Gamers were the first to adopt 3-D headsets, but now real-estate agents in Los Angeles also wear them, to give property tours to non-local buyers.[1] Therapists employ VR in the treatment of

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1    Gibson Real Estate, June 2016.

posttraumatic stress disorder and to reduce flying phobias.[2] One Australian man used the gear to witness the birth of his child, with his wife 4,000 miles away.[3] Film repositories like Netflix offer virtual theaters where online attendees can observe one another's reactions. The industry upswing began in 2014 when Facebook purchased the pioneering VR firm Oculus (Irvine, California) for $2 billion.

At the time of writing, several companies are pushing VR initiatives that in many cases include cooperation between software developers and hardware manufacturers. A flurry of market activity includes:

- Oculus in Samsung Gear VR
- Google Daydream View for Android phones
- Sony PlayStation Project Morpheus VR headset
- HTC's Vive VR headset
- GoPro's 360-degree capture rig
- Vuzix's IWear 720 headset
- Samsung's VR camera, the Gear 360

This article draws on the author's experiences with the Oculus / Samsung Gear that combines 3-D software (Oculus) running on a Samsung smartphone (Galaxy Note 4 and 5) mounted inside the Samsung Gear VR headset, a relatively inexpensive and functional setup. Virtual-world experiences are documented from this setup with screen shots and video captures available on YouTube, to provide the reader with visual references for the argument. The experiences described fit into what might be called the third wave of VR, a third push to reinvent media through immersive simulation. This "Wave 3" revives the recurrent cultural forecast that VR will change everything. Prior to this wave came two others, one in the 1990s and another at the turn of the 21st century. These prior waves were about VR concepts[4] and VR aesthetics[5] respectively, or so it seems to this author, as the on-and-off phases of VR appear to repeat over decades.[6]

While major players like Facebook, Samsung, Google, and Microsoft are entering the field of VR, the related field of Augmented Reality (AR) is held out by Apple as the most promising future for media. Instead of occluding the actual surroundings, AR overlays sense perception with virtualized information. See-through lenses add visual information much like an iPhone camera that shows the amount of zoom or filters that go into a capture of the given environment. AR thus avoids the "hooded" effect of VR headsets that insulate and replace

2    Wiederhold/Rizzo 2005, 183–185.
3    Anon 2015.
4    For an early theoretical discussion of VR, see Heim 1993.
5    For a discussion of many of the aesthetic experiments, see Heim 1998.
6    For a more general discussion of the phases of reality / virtuality fluctuations throughout cultural history, see Heim 2013 and Heim 2017.

user perceptions of the surrounding world. In short, analysis and critique of AR will require an approach that is different from that used for VR. Apple's wagering on AR over VR requires an uncompromising clarity of design not unlike Apple's decision (as of 2016) to not mix touch screens (iPad) with personal computers (MacBook), while others, like Microsoft, offer a mixed operating system that blends a touch interface with the traditional keyboard and mouse (Surface Pro). Only time will tell whether the clean break between AR and VR will hold.

## REVIVING QUESTIONS

The installation of VR in current culture raises familiar questions: Are the concerns debated in previous decades still valid in light of current experiences? Does VR enhance or detract from reality? What connects the virtual with the real, and vice versa? How subjectively private is the VR experience? Does anyone think VR can become a spiritual practice that heightens the sense of reality?

This attempt to answer such admittedly big questions begins with an overview of discussions that took place in 1999 and in which the author participated. The concerns raised in 1999 will be compared with immersive experiences using current VR gear. The immersive experiences will be sprinkled with the language of contemporary archetypal psychology, drawing on James Hillman, Thomas Moore, Ginette Paris, and Thom Cavalli.[7] Following in the footsteps of Carl Jung, archetypal psychology points to certain primal values championed by Renaissance scholars that can serve today as resources for envisioning VR as a tool for spiritual evolution. The argument contends that the architecture of virtual worlds invokes much of the architecture of the natural world as perceived by antiquity (and retrieved by Renaissance scholars like Marsilio Ficino). The primal elemental correspondences that bridge the real and the virtual allow virtual constructs to manifest aspects of the already given universe. With this strategy, primal elements serve as a bridge connecting real and virtual experiences. The bridge also suggests ways to create a focused and informed soulful practice that deepens sensory appreciation of the natural world. Through heightened awareness of the primal elements of experience, the cybernaut or VR traveler, like the Renaissance magus, aims for psychological balance by applying simple meditative techniques post headset immersion. Unlike other media, VR deals explicitly with becoming more fully present as an actively engaged participant. Deliberate ritualized activity after wearing the headset can deepen the sense of presence that occurs within and beyond the technology.

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7    Iconic texts for this group include the anthology of James Hillman's work Moore 1997; also Moore 2015, Paris 1998, and Cavalli 2002.

# ECSTASY? ESCAPE?

During the twentieth century, many theorists feared that film would destroy live theater, that television would eliminate radio, that DVD recorders would doom real-time television. Hindsight may show such concerns to have been off target, but critical concerns often mark important turning points in media history. After all, radio did eventually come to occupy a different niche in the media environment after the introduction of television; dramatic theater did learn to emphasize certain aspects of live performance once it began competing with film; and live television continues to supply sports and breaking news. Similarly, reviewing past arguments about VR helps adjust how we perceive VR today. The two arguments revisited here were concerns of a conference held at the University of Graz, Austria, in 1999.[8]

The first is found an essay by Elisabeth Kraus entitled "Virtuality and Spirituality in Science Fiction Literature".[9] In the essay, Kraus traces the VR themes running through science-fiction literature, a literary genre potent enough to have created important semantic links between technology and everyday language, inventing terms like "cyberspace".[10] The essay by Kraus provides an insightful overview of several novels by William Gibson and Philip K. Dick, and illuminates the relationship between sci-fi novels and films like the Wachowski brothers' THE MATRIX (1999). In these works Kraus sees a complex and ambivalent response to virtuality. The novels and films do not simply use cyberspace and virtual reality as props for characters and actions. The narratives go deeper by exploring the positive and negative potentials of computer-generated constructs such as VR, cyberspace, and AR. These works of fiction stimulate a multivalent criticism of technology looming over the cultural horizon of the 1990s. At that time, many critics, including this author, warned of a threat to reality with the introduction of VR. A Circe-like "technological Platonism", we feared, would entrap users in a fascination with a perfect world of mathematically streamlined objects, thus eclipsing the actual imperfect material world.[11] Such Platonism, Kraus shows, has an explicit and documentable history in the personal background of Dick. The lure of sheer transcendence also runs through the cyberpunk genre of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling.

Kraus's overview highlights VR's transcendence, but the transcendence is a specific kind. The essay's title conjoins virtuality with spirituality (*Religiosität*), where spirituality is understood in a very specific way. This spirituality is the "techno-spirituality" celebrated by San Francisco author Erik Davis. Davis's

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8  The papers are printed in the conference volume Wessely/Larcher 2000.

9  Wessely/Larcher 2000, 65–78. Citations are from the English version provided on CD-ROM that accompanies the book.

10  Gibson 1984.

11  See, for example, chap. 7, "The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace", in Heim 1993.

book *Techgnosis*[12] is cited by Kraus on her first pages, and her essay refers us to Davis's notion of techno-spirituality as a gnostic variation of spirituality. Davis coined the hybrid term "techgnosis" to identify technologies like VR that provide a transcendent experience or ineffable ecstasy, a sensation akin to "electronic LSD". Here Davis follows early twentieth-century scholars, such as Hans Jonas, who theorized that passive intoxication was a goal for ancient Christian Gnostics. Intoxication is a flight from feeling alienated in an unfriendly materialistic universe. Ecclesiastical literalists took this kind of Gnosticism as their polemical archenemy throughout early Christian history. Literalist ecclesiastics sometimes caricatured their Gnostic brethren as transcendental spiritualists who cultivated fantasies devoid of concrete practical morality. This supposedly Gnostic spirituality inclined toward an intellectualism more appropriate for angels than for humans. Davis recognizes that this view of Christian Gnosticism has been outmoded since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts, which became widely available at the turn of the twenty-first century, but he still ties this image of spirituality to VR enthusiasts while disclaiming historical accuracy regarding the ancient Gnostic movement. Davis writes, "The authenticity of spiritual ideas and religious experiences does not really concern me here; rather I am attempting to understand the often unconscious metaphysics of information culture by looking at it through the archetypal lens of religious and occult myth", and continues,

> Gnosticism is such a fragmentary and suggestive patchwork of texts, hearsay, myth, and rumor that you can call almost any contemporary phenomenon "gnostic" and get away with it … I admit that by teasing out the gnostic threads from the webwork of technoculture, I am perhaps only making a further mess of things, and it seems best to remind the reader that we are dealing with psychological patterns and archetypal echoes, not some secret lore handed down through ages.[13]

In contrast to Davis's casual treatment, if we want to make a serious connection between virtuality and spirituality – as Kraus does in the title of her essay – we need to remove the notion of spirituality from a passive, inebriated, and uncritical experience. Instead we should conceive a spirituality that is active, alert, and sober. As the archetypal psychologist Thomas Moore points out, a spirituality embedded in today's complex secular world requires critical thinking and patient cultivation.[14] Such spirituality needs deliberate rituals to connect conscious life with the deeper psychological levels of soul-making. Passive reliance on technology, especially a hallucinatory technology, is unlikely to integrate and order the obligations and distractions of everyday life. While an imaginary Gnos-

12    Davis 2015.
13    Davis 2015, 80 and 93.
14    Moore 2015.

tic ecstasy may have seemed cogent for a fictional cyberspace of the 1990s, a contemporary spirituality of today's Internet and VR requires greater clarity and critical fortitude. The requirements of actually dwelling in virtuality are different from the requirements of merely imagining and occasionally building in virtuality. Fiction, especially science fiction, can foresee emerging trends, but its literature can hardly serve as a manual for living in the present. BLADERUNNER (Ridley Scott, US 1982) is a wonderful film, but its dank set should not be confused with the lovely Bradbury Building in downtown Los Angeles that served as the backdrop for the movie.

## BODY AMNESIA? GROUNDING?

The second essay to revisit is by Elisabeth List and is entitled "Floating Identities, Terminal Bodies: The Virtualization of Existence in Cyberspace".[15] This essay proceeds from the twentieth-century epistemological framework of phenomenology (Franz Brentano, Alfred Schütz, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Francisco Varela), so here the lens we see through is a direct experiential lens rather than a literary fictional one. We (the phenomenological subjects) are looking at the contents of our own experiences through the Cartesian *ego cogito*. The historical Cartesian ego originally lacked bodily awareness as René Descartes in the seventeenth century considered the "outer" world to be a grid map of mechanical forces that subsume the organic physical body. A number of twentieth-century phenomenologists developed an alternative view of the *cogito* ("I am now thinking") that includes somatic self-awareness ("I feel in my limbs") in their descriptive research.[16] List pays close attention to sensory feedback in describing cyberspace, and she notices a profound problem in so doing:

> By distinguishing between intentional states and intentional objects of various kinds Brentano takes what he calls "intentional inexistence" as the ontological state of such objects. "Intentional inexistence" now is just the term Brentano uses for what we today call "virtuality", namely "not really existing in an ordinary sense" but existing in the sense of being able to be thought of, as thinkable, as possible, in short, as virtually existing. This idea has far reaching consequences for our topic, because taken seriously it means that all objects we can conceive of are in fact of this kind, including our bodies and our selves. The thought experiments and science fiction scenarios are about converting all experiential space into informational space, in which sensual bodies are no longer of concern. The place held by an embodied subject would then

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15  Wessely/Larcher 2000, 17–37. The German title of this essay is "Platon im Cyberspace: Technologien der Entkörperlichung und Visionen vom körperlosen Selbst in der telematischen Kultur" ("Plato in Cyberspace: Disembodying Technologies and Visions of the Bodiless Self in Information Culture").

16  See Merleau-Ponty 1945, Gendlin 1978, Hanna 2004, Levin 1991.

shrink to a zero point of pure awareness – this would indeed be a completely new form of existence.[17]

In other words, bodily sensations might also become data. If a sensation can be noticed, why not digitize it? Why not have it represented in the virtual world just as we represent musical tones in binary digits? As components of the ego's experience, why not add physical sensations to the map of virtual worlds? List raises the specter of a voided subjectivity with zero non-virtual content. With everything human uploaded to data storage, what role is left for human agency? With everything virtualized, what remains of subjectivity? Can there be a pure awareness distinct in theory from the virtual world? What is left then to upload to the computer?[18]

List worries about the folly of reducing everything to the virtual. Much of what situates the self – gender, race, the community of other people who help construct the personal identity – grows through embodiment, and no programmed information can exhaust that self-identity. She sees, nonetheless, a "terminal body" emerging in contemporary culture, the neglected body that builds an online identity, or several online identities, that feels more substantial and more supported than the embodied and situated self. The alienated body then becomes a terminal for logging on to the cyber-self or multiple online identities that thrive in a virtual community, a community that reinforces the chosen avatar or virtual identity more effectively than the physically surrounding community. In this way, "computer addiction" affirms the virtual self that is constructed and fortified by the online community (e-mails, forums, Facebook, MUDs, instant messaging, etc.).

Correctly, in my view, List finds an alternate model of physical self-perception in the Chinese paradigm of the "energy body". The holistic life force flowing through the human body can be awakened by conscious practice as is evidenced by the arts of Tai Chi Chuan, Yoga, and Qigong. These meditative arts use soft movements and dynamic breathing to stimulate a warm current that can be sensed directly by the focused mind. Gendlin's "focusing" techniques function similarly, by reaching unconscious blockages that then bubble up to the surface of consciousness. When the energy body or bioenergy is consciously felt, the terminal body is reincarnated and replanted in its cosmic situation of embodiment.

In her conclusion, "Wired: A Meditation on Being Online", List describes a phenomenon that many feel today: despite efforts to maintain a feeling of being grounded or rooted in the physical realm, a highly stimulating digital environment can keep the brain "switched on" with exciting answers and engaging

17   Wessely/Larcher 2000, 31.
18   See an argument for this view in Zhai 1998. The classic in this line of thought is Moravec 1988.

conversations even when awakening from sleep. The body feels "weightless, feeble, unable to resist". Here "the self feels de-centered, disseminated in the flux of intellectual or imaginary inputs, information, and media events". We feel in danger of losing our anchor in the real life situations of our bodies and the persons around us.

## VIRTUAL ARCHITECTURE

The essays by Elisabeth Kraus and Elisabeth List raised two major concerns about VR: ecstatic drug-like escapes that can damage personal life, and body amnesia that over time weakens sensory grounding, respectively. Both Kraus and List (K&L) deal with large, qualitative hazards, but the K&L hazards are not inconsistent with the empirical safety warnings listed in the user guide provided by the manufacturers of Samsung Gear headsets:[19]

- A comfortable virtual reality experience requires an unimpaired sense of motion and balance. Do not use the headset when you are: Tired; need sleep; under the influence of alcohol or drugs; hung-over; have digestive problems; under emotional stress or anxiety; or when suffering from cold, flu, headaches, migraines, or earaches, as this can increase your susceptibility to adverse symptoms.
- Just as with the symptoms people can experience after they disembark a cruise ship, symptoms of virtual reality exposure can persist and become more apparent hours after use. These post-use symptoms can include excessive drowsiness and decreased ability to multi-task. These symptoms may put you at an increased risk of injury when engaging in normal activities in the real world.
- Take at least a 10 to 15 minute break every 30 minutes, even if you don't think you need it. Each person is different, so take more frequent and longer breaks if you feel discomfort. You should decide what works best for you.
- People who are prone to motion sickness in the real world also have a heightened risk of experiencing discomfort while using the Gear VR. Such individuals should take extra care to read and follow these warnings carefully.
- We recommend consulting with a doctor before using the Gear VR if you are pregnant, elderly, have psychiatric disorders, suffer from a heart condition, have pre-existing binocular vision abnormalities or suffer from a heart condition or other serious medical condition.

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19   These warnings appear in the booklet entitled "Getting Started Guide" that accompanies the Gear VR and can also be found in a slightly different version at www.oculus.com/warnings.

- Do not use the Gear VR if you have symptoms of squint, amblyopia,[20] or aniso-metropia.[21] Using the Gear VR may aggravate these symptoms.
- Anyone who previously has had a seizure, loss of awareness, or other symptom linked to an epileptic condition should see a doctor before using the headset.
- This product should not be used by children under the age of 13, as the headset is not sized for children and improper sizing can lead to discomfort or health effects, and younger children are in a critical period in visual development.
- The Gear VR should not be used by children under the age of 13. Watching videos or playing games with the Gear VR may affect the visual development of children.
- When children, age 13 or older, use the Gear VR, adults should limit their usage time and ensure they take frequent breaks. Adults should monitor children closely after using the Gear VR if children feel discomfort.

These cautionary statements from Samsung and Oculus are not inconsistent with the K&L concerns about escapism and body amnesia, but the K&L concerns go beyond Western medicine. The K&L concerns are holistic and not measurable by clinical instruments. The K&L concerns go deeper than the balance of left eye with right eye (necessary for stereoscopy). They reach down into the balance-of-life issue. A holistic lifestyle balance is not objectively measurable, although an imbalance certainly can be felt. Additionally, balance of life will differ depending on the type of virtuality involved.

Each implementation of virtuality, whether real-estate tour or remote birth by telepresence, has its own ratio of real-to-virtual. Depending on the goal of the medium, VR can run from hyper-real photography to various shades of AR. AR can sprinkle industrial or anatomical information over a lens on the real world; telepresence surgeons can view a Skype-like capture of a patient during a remote operation. Each application shades the degree of virtuality. Yet, aside from telepresence and photographic realism, virtuality can share certain other built-in features of the real world. What does any virtual building share with the real world? Here is where understanding the world-hood of any world can generate practical methods for balancing real with virtual. Architectural handles available across real and virtual worlds might allow users to adjust to changes and modify the holistic experience of world shifting. Are such handles available?

20 From the National Eye Institute: Amblyopia is the medical term used when the vision in one of the eyes is reduced because the eye and the brain are not working together properly. The eye itself looks normal, but it is not being used normally because the brain is favoring the other eye. This condition is also sometimes called lazy eye.

21 From the American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology: Anisometropia means that the two eyes have a different refractive power, so there is unequal focus between the two eyes. This is often due to one eye having a slightly different shape from the other, causing asymmetric astigmatism, asymmetric far-sightedness (hyperopia), or asymmetric near-sightedness (myopia).

This is the importance of the *architecture* of virtual worlds. Knowing the built qualities of both real and virtual dwellings supports a dual dwelling process. Building and dwelling are related. Noticing shared aspects of real and virtual constructs provides handles for adjusting balance. Deliberate awareness can balance dual dimensions.

The building of virtual worlds is based on pre-given structures of the primary or real world. Real world architecture is buttressed by thousands of years of conscious evolution, of study and experiment with materials for habitation and for public gatherings. By contrast, a relatively new question is: What does a virtual world look like?

This question came up frequently while I was teaching graduate students at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, between 1996 and 2002. My two seminars "Virtual Worlds Theory" and "Virtual Worlds Design" produced dozens of online 3-D worlds, many of them intended to push the boundaries. Students hosted live events in custom-designed virtual environments. These worlds are illustrated in other publications, and the logs are available online.[22] Some experiments followed the guidebook *A Virtual Realist Primer to Virtual World Design* by the Swedish scholar Mikael Jakobsson.[23] But one question often posed was: What limits, if any, does architecture have in virtuality? Or, rephrased: Can we produce worlds that ignore reality, or is there something that transcends virtuality, some anchor that pins the virtual to the primary world? (Notice that the "primary" world prejudges the issue by ranking the virtual as derivative.) The question arose in the first worlds built because the majority of art students wanted to collaborate on building a world without gravity. They imagined spaces where avatars zoom from place to place, a world where there was enough gravity to land on floating platforms, but not a world where transportation was a heavy liftfig (see fig. 1). No traffic jams in Los Angeles – imagine that if you can!

While the Art Center experiments were sometimes wild yet sometimes successful as experiments, they did not address the K&L concerns about virtuality. Art Center students were simply enthralled with the opportunity to create innovative virtual environments for gaming and social gatherings. They stood on the cusp of creativity, with some of the first classes in Web design and computer animation in the nation. Our worlds were not fully immersive 3-D through headsets but on-screen faux 3-D in a medium known as "ActiveWorlds". It was a time to unleash, not restrain, the creative impulse. There was no pause to ask, What bridges can we create for balancing virtual with real? What aspects of world building, of design architecture, can bridge virtual and real? There was

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22   References and extensive logs are found at www.mheim.com.
23   E-book available online at http://www.mheim.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Virtual-Realist-Primer.pdf

Fig. 1: Bird avatar landing on platform in low-gravity environment.

no pause to ask, What does the *given* world contribute? What features of the primary world appear also in the virtual? How is balance possible? What handles can be grasped inside the transition chamber that connect real and virtual? Any answer would have to take into account the fact that any definition of "real world" would be highly contentious among philosophical people. We might, for example, settle on something as abstract as geometrical figures like triangles, squares, and circles appearing in both real and virtual worlds. Computer graphics and animation, in fact, hang on the framework of geometry. But an abstract grid does not offer a range of qualitative elements to mix and balance.

Mixing and balancing is a requirement. As will be addressed later, the art of mixing and balancing goes back millennia and has flourished in underground traditions like alchemy. The ancient art of balance also resembles the Asian skill of feng shui, the adjustment of subtle energy flows in a living environment or ecology. What Western culture calls "workflow" is not simply ergonomics or healthy habits of posture alignment and frequent breaks. Moreover, workflow is to remove blocks when the work process stagnates. Effective workflow promotes efficiency and a more engaging experience. So, too, with mixing and balancing. The entry into and exit from different worlds need not be jolting or

escapist, need not induce bodily numbness or somatic amnesia. The handles for exit and entry are the primal ingredients codified centuries ago throughout the Mediterranean. These handles are the known four elements, the roots of reality, represented in almost all cultures, and they are easily overlooked because they are both subtle and primal: fire, water, air, and earth. These four elements are not identical with the literal material substances that we manipulate with our tools. They are rather archetypal qualities of experience. In fact, both Western and Asian traditions list a fifth element of spirit or attention that plays or hovers freely above the four elements. Spirit is sometimes called the fifth or "quintessential" element. Spirit transcends the four elements so it can move among them. The spirit is what balances the four elements.

So the architecture of worlds, both virtual and real worlds, can be felt as experience layered with four basic elements, four handles that the fifth element of spirit can grasp and harmonize for each world experience.

## TOUR OF TWO EXAMPLES

The backstory of the four elements will make more sense after a brief tour of two pieces of virtual-worlds architecture.

*The Oculus Lobby* is the landing pad where virtual voyagers – cybernauts – first perceive virtuality (see fig. 2). It is the combo hub/library/store where the immersion begins. The aesthetic of this room is both indoors and outdoors: the wide world reflected in virtuality. The Lobby shows a three-dimensional environment resembling a modern-style apartment with areas for socializing, reading, and
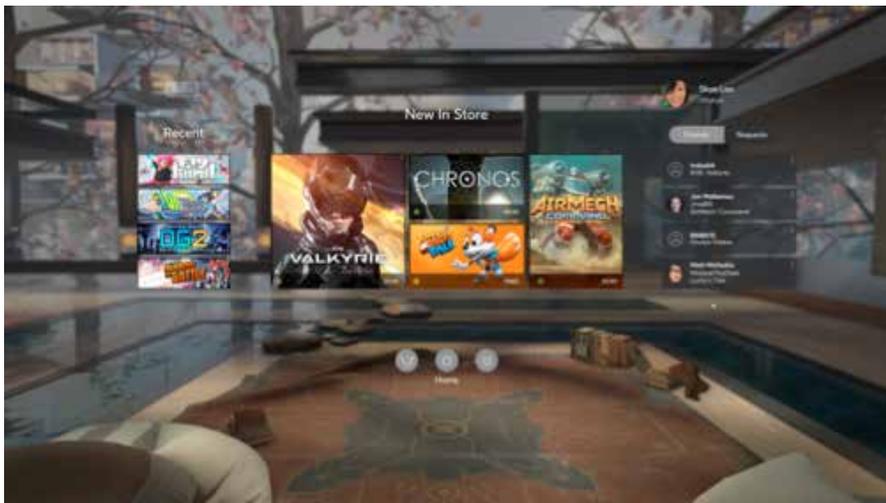


Fig.2: View inside the Oculus Lobby Hub.

lounging, along with a triptych of well-lighted panels. The panels invite viewers to choose a virtual experience or game to enter next, with a glance and a tap on the headset. So each adventure with the headset goes through the Lobby first. The Lobby has a specifically modern architecture (think Rudolf Schindler's 1930s' beach houses in southern California) where the outdoors blends with the indoors. The interior has patios, windows, and skylights, merging outdoors with indoors. The Lobby panel is also the commercial hub where virtual experiences are advertised and sold. The advertisements show prices along with the comfort levels and hardware requirements (hand controller, disk space, etc.).

A two-minute video tour minus the three-dimensional immersion of the headset can be found at the private video link https://youtu.be/w_bpluxIOkk. Notice the blend of indoors and outdoors, the advertising panels, the areas for socializing, as well as the fireplace, trees outdoors, skylight, and the reflective water pools. Much as the television or computer in the living quarters pours the world into private space, so too the advertising panels bring awareness of other virtual experiences into the apartment-like Lobby.

As in modern architecture, the feel is spaciousness and fullness, the outer world blended with inner and private spaces. Everything is available with all-at-once accessibility. While from the outside someone wearing a headset seen may appear claustrophobically challenged and solipsistic, the insider view is all-inclusive comprehensiveness: the plate is full. Like a shopping mall, the Lobby encloses the shopper while seeming to offer everything in a wide-open space.

When we consider the four primary elements in the Lobby, the fireplace clamors for attention (see fig. 3). The artificial alcove or hearth honors the primal element fire that doubtlessly fascinated cave dwellers in the Stone Age.



Fig. 3 The elements visible in the Oculus Lobby Hub.

In front of the fire is the calming reflective pool, water being the cosmological element that balances fire. The more subtle meaning of the water element is reflective empathic fellow feeling, which then balances the fires of personal ambition and ego propulsion. The Lobby has a literal fireplace balancing cool, reflective pools of water.

The Lobby skylight is special (see fig. 4). Traditional architecture often celebrates public spaces, especially the entries of city halls, with a skylight. The ceiling window that funnels sky light into a gathering place is called the *oculus* (Latin for "eye"). The view upward through the Lobby eye shows cantilevered structures floating in clouds, contrasting with earthy branches and trees. So: earth, air, fire, water – all four elements populate the Oculus Lobby.



Fig. 4: Skylight view inside the Oculus Lobby.

Leaving the Lobby to enter a VR experience or game means plunging into a different mix of elements. The four elements are not to be taken as literally as we find them in the Lobby. Taken less literally, the elements are subtler, more soulful, more capable of becoming components of spiritual life. Taken less literally, the elements can be cultivated by attention balanced by spirit.

*Land's End* is an example that illustrates both literal and metaphorical elements. Something like a maze, the game moves the cybernaut through a series of locations on a simulated beach, through high mountains, and over a vast ocean. *Land's End* often presents the traveler with puzzles that must be solved before the next move through the series of locations can be made. The thrill of the game is the sense of place when near rushing waves, on the tops of mountains, inside a cave, or flying through the air. The four elements can feel quite

literal here. A five-minute video review (see the private video link https://youtu.be/N6nXkTTAUUs) provides a second-hand sense of how the game is played (see fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Inside level 1 of Land's End.

Here we are no longer indoors in the cave-like ambience of the Lobby. Here is no roof, no sense of enclosure, but rather exposure to a wide expanse. While the seascape lies ahead with waves crashing onshore below, earthy mountains invite climbing and odd artifacts beckon with their puzzles. Connecting the dots on petroglyphs opens new pathways and tests mental effort (intellectual activity relates to the archetypal sense of Air). The reddish tinge of clouds and sky inject intensity (red relates to the planet Mars, active aggression). The archetypal-metaphorical significance of the four elements becomes more important than their literal significance. A short lists includes:

- Fire: Creativity and inspiration. Relating to ambitions, goals, and dreams. Metaphorically, the beginning phase of all ventures of mind and spirit.
- Water: Emotional empathy. Addressing the quality of human relationships and connections to others. Metaphorically, friendship, love, and the entire continuum in between.
- Air: Intellect and active planning. Dynamic change, conflict, and power. Metaphors for the constructive and destructive tendencies within every human.
- Earth: Material possessions. Stability issues of home, money, and career. Related to generosity and greed.
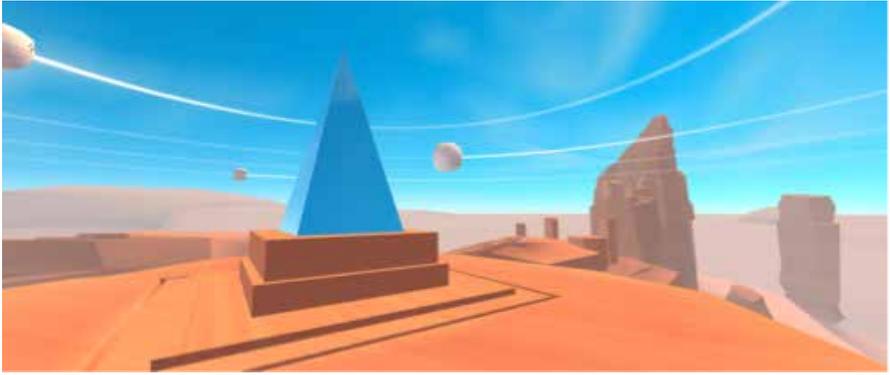
Fig. 6: Inside level 2 of Land's End.

Some of the puzzle areas in *Land's End* suggest a Platonic perfection, axiomatic geometry (see fig. 6). The primary elements then shift into archetypal-metaphorical mode. The still snapshot feels less like a place than an abstract construction, the product of computer graphics. Less literal simulation, the area projects an airy mental attitude rather than an earthy grounding. K&L's references to "technological Platonism" and the quest for escapist perfection come to mind.


Fig. 7: Inside level 3 of Land's End.

The traveler's gaze is usually controlled by the journey throughout *Land's End.* The structures provide highlighted targets and direct movements in specific ways (see fig. 7). The gaze remains directed by the game's goal, which is to move the viewer through a sequence of landscapes. Sometimes the landscapes are thrilling, but the land does not ground the traveler. This differs fundamentally from the Lobby. In *Land's End,* there is a comforting sense of direction within a potentially wide-open Nowhere and Everywhere. These factors then create a

certain tilt so that being-there is equivalent to being-directed and being–in-a-planned-environment. The dominant puzzle activity (Air) is balanced somewhat by the occasional thrill of a spectacular point of view or arriving at a targeted location (Earth). The Water element is merely literal, as the game in the current version offers no fellowship or interaction unless solving a puzzle gives a momentary frisson with its creator. The Fire element is subordinated to the pathway built into the game. Targets are provided at every step, not explored on one's own energy.

Assuming some of these observations are on mark, what can be taken away from these two samples of virtuality? How do the elements in each world become "handles" or ways of holding onto the experience and then later balancing the virtual world? If we create a personal transition or immersion chamber after leaving one of these worlds, what does the balancing process look like?

To answer these questions, it helps to look into the backstory of the four elements.

## BACKSTORY OF THE FOUR ELEMENTS

> Neoplatonic theurgists were known as magicians
> and considered capable not just of extracting
> men's souls from their bodies but also of
> returning souls to their bodies, just like Empedocles.[24]

The four elements were not originally called elements. "Elements" (στοιχεία / stoikheía) was the term used copiously by Aristotle (384–322 BCE) when discussing his predecessors of a century earlier. Empedocles of Sicily (490–430 BCE) had been the first to philosophize about the four "roots" (*rhizōmata*) underlying phenomena.[25] Aristotle spoke scientifically while Empedocles expressed his philosophy poetically. Instead of claiming to be a scientist, Empedocles claimed the role of healer, wizard, and political soothsayer. Empedocles, Pythagoras, and Heraclitus were life coaches who portrayed themselves as interveners in the human condition and not as objective observers. Their descriptions of phenomena arrived before empirical objectivity split off from subjective, intuitive experience. In his poetry, Empedocles declared himself a wizard of awareness, concerned with meditative states of mind outside conventional thinking.[26] Identifying the four roots of things, Empedocles described divine presences: "Shining Zeus, life-bringing Hera, Aidoneus, and Nestis whose tear-drops are a

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24   Kingsley 1997, 302.
25   Diels/Kranz 2004, frag. 6; Inwood 2001, frag. 12.
26   The non-conventional stance of Empedocles is elaborated by classicist Kingsley in Kingsley 2004, 315–559. See also Kingsley 1997.

well-spring to mortals." Air, earth, fire, and water appear as powerful divinities, not as chemical compounds. As William Guthrie wrote in his history of Greek philosophy:

> Empedocles combined his search for the ultimate nature of things with the demands of a deeply religious outlook, to which the nature and destiny of the human soul was of fundamental interest. He saw the answer to Parmenides in the substitution of four ultimate root-substances or elements (earth, water, air and fire) for the single principle of the Milesians.[27]

Empedocles's roots create web-like mixtures, blending what Aristotle would later describe as wet and dry, cold and hot qualities. Empedocles's interest in the four root qualities was for healing and balancing purposes. Undistracted by the ten thousand things of daily life, Empedocles's meditations cultivated an awareness of the basics that remain with a person throughout a lifetime.[28] Empedocles was an exponent of harmonizing elements that are animated by love and strife, attraction and repulsion. The two mixing principles that govern the four roots, love and strife, operate in cycles. With love ascendant, the roots form organic wholes or "spheres". In time, strife comes into play and pulls the harmony apart, so that the distinct separateness of things produces gaps in separate components.

Contrary to the nineteenth-century picture of a proto-scientist, his ancient biographers describe Empedocles a spiritual healer, exactly as he described himself. Empedocles describes people flocking to him, looking for healing. In the fifth century BCE, medicine was part of philosophy. And it was precisely through ancient medicine that Empedocles's legacy was preserved after philosophy split into the intellectualism of Plato and the scientific pursuits of Aristotle. The four humors of the human body and the four temperaments dominated medical practice throughout the medieval period. During this period, Arab alchemists preserved the ancient writings and their systems of mineral and astrological correspondences became part of the transmission of antiquity that the Medici family imported during the early Renaissance. The Medici's translator of ancient writings was wizard and sorcerer Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), who founded the Florentine Academy. Ficino's humanistic writings were later eclipsed by scientific empiricism, but his ideas smoldered secretly through the centuries, occasionally drawing the attention of esoteric and hermetic researchers. Secret societies, Rosicrucians, and alchemists continued using the four roots, and in Britain in the late 1800s, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn coded the elements into a unitary system of correspondences that culminated in the divination sys-

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27    Guthrie 1962, 5.
28    Fragment 16 / 110, Inwood, 219.

tem of modern tarot. Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist, drew on the four elements for his typology of the psyche, and new Jungians James Hillman (1926–2011) and especially Thomas Moore (1940– ) built therapy on the rediscovered works of Ficino. Moore elaborated Ficino's magical astrology in his 1973 book *The Planets Within: The Astrological Psychology of Marsilio Ficino* before writing his best-selling books *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* (1992) and *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life* (1997).

Moore's practical approach to therapy or "making a soul of one's own" sketches a rough blueprint for bridges between reality and virtuality.

## BRIDGING REAL AND VIRTUAL

> By earth we see earth; by water, water;
> by air, shining air; but by fire, blazing fire;
> love by love and strife by baneful strife.
> *Empedocles, Frag. 109*

The active process of bridging real and virtual worlds can use the symbolic four elements to provide a psychologically soft landing for virtual travelers. The four elements can graft the virtual onto the real by using magical correspondences: "By earth we see earth; by water, we see water" and so on. The procedure is magical (associational) rather than rational, symbolic rather than literal, phenomenological rather than objective, and ritualistic rather than technological. Procedures of natural magic are commonplace but mysterious. Flowers and candlelight are typical tools of natural magic. Flowers in the hand are more than vegetation when offered with love, and under the right circumstances, candlelight is more romance than illumination. Magic applies symbolic procedures to achieve mood shifts in the self that daydreams, imagines, and invents goals for daily life. The deep self is also the self that worries over K&L's twin issues: escapism that damages personal life, and sensory deprivation that leads to body amnesia, insomnia, living mainly "in the head". These dangers are not felt on the level of tangible external threats or disclaimers or of precautionary warnings found in hardware manuals.

The deep self works from and is affected by visceral imagery. And since each virtual world has its own imaginal architecture, the bridging process will differ depending on the world. Different elements dominate each world and therefore require special compensatory approaches to create balance. To illustrate the general procedure and to show differences in specific operations, this article concludes with two distinct rituals. One procedure covers the Oculus Lobby, and the other *Land's End.* Both first-person phenomenological descriptions as-

sume that the virtual traveler has worn the headset for at least a few minutes, that the online experience has been relatively smooth, and that the helmet has been removed and the traveler is seated in quiet surroundings. Because of the main issues raised by K&L – escapism and uprooting – both procedures focus on grounding and therefore emphasize the earth element. Each phenomenological procedure moves through three phases: recall – visualize – connect.

## SAMPLE PROCEDURES

*Oculus Lobby Phenomenology:* Sitting upright and alert, taking a few deep breaths, eyes closed, I turn my attention to my feet, flat on the floor. Feeling the ground, I allow afterimages to play across the screen of my eyelids as the virtual landing pad fades in my memory, softening to a daydream. The lobby appears as the pod of ingress and egress, where doors open to adventure and virtual journeys begin. I recall the colorful icons of several advertising panels. Which choices did I make and which choices are left for next time? Memory seeks out the details of the Oculus Lobby: stairs, skylight, water pools, fireplace, comfort pillow, bookshelf. What color were the pillows on the floor? Were there flames in the fireplace? What color are the trees on the veranda? Details that remain vague will need another trip to refresh. Eyes now open slowly on real world surroundings. I am home! The familiar room pours in like the dawn. Real surroundings register their presences: desk, windows, doorway, bookshelves. Attention fixes on something nearby, perhaps a photograph, a pen on the table, the case for the VR Gear, or the cat behind the drapes. With each breath, I connect with each piece of the real world that makes up Home and the comfortable memories of Home. This is a new homecoming. From this place, memories of the virtual become postcards of journeys far from Home. Breathing from my belly now, this point of familiarity – holding the pen, petting the cat, moving a favorite chair – is the axis from which virtual travel emanates. From virtual landing pad to Home ... The Lobby is not (yet?) a comfortable home.

## *LAND'S END* PHENOMENOLOGY

Eyes closed, I review the afterimages of *Land's End.* Vast spaces seen from high cliffs overlooking the Ocean. Exhilarating flight of birds over the water, climbing into clouds. Spaciousness. Open horizons. Free flight from cliff to cliff, guided by the zip line of the game path. Each puzzle solved brings new motion, new flight. Arranging a giant monolith, I see the pieces fit together and again fly! Release to freedom! Turn to take in wide, startling vistas! Home again, retelling my last

adventure, discovering new facets of the landscape, the dead ends, the block-ages, the puzzles solved.

Head movement and eye focus have been doing all the walking and problem solving, all the movement through space. Helmet off and settled now with feet on the ground, I decide whether to walk in fantasy (subjective daydream) or to walk slowly across the room and then step outdoors for a slow walk around the block comparing and contrasting the familiar environment that grounds my daily life and the virtual world of *Land's End*. As T. S. Eliot recorded, "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

## CONCLUSION

While some questions about VR from the 1990s may seem overblown when seen through the viewfinder of today's gear, some of the larger questions – such as those raised by the two essays discussed – still hang over the technol-ogy. In fact, these big questions concerning escapism and body amnesia seem headed for a showdown in the coming decades. The intense usage of technol-ogy is on the rise, and contemporary culture has already begun to wobble when it comes to dealing with these issues.

Looking at two entry-level VR experiences, this essay has drawn out threads from contemporary archetypal psychology – four-elements theory – in order to produce some samples of a spiritual healing process. The process uses as-pects of virtual architecture to enact a conscious bridge connecting nodes of experience across virtual and real worlds. The background and rationale for this procedure were sketched historically and philosophically. While the conscious skills and self-control needed to enact procedures like these may seem rare in today's environment, the growth momentum of virtual technologies may press the next generation to develop if not these, then similar skills.

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# Book Reviews

Frank G. Bosman

# Game Review
# The Turing Test (Bulkhead Interactive)
Action-Adventure, UK 2016

*The Turing Test* is a first-person puzzle game developed by Bulkhead Interactive and published by Square Enix in 2016. The developers of *The Turing Test* previously also made the game *Pneuma. Breath of Life* (2015), which uses the same game mechanics. From a ludological perspective, *The Turing Test* closely resembles other games in its genre, such as *The Talos Principle* (2014) and the *Portal* series (2007, 2011). The player has to navigate through different levels that have been divided into sections. A save point is created between sections. In each section, the player has to navigate through a maze-like room in a moon base, and does so by manipulating energy balls, levers, and gravitation machines and by clever logical thinking. As in the case of *Portal* and *Talos*, some of the more difficult challenges can only be overcome by out-of-the-box thinking, using the game mechanics in new ways. The suggestion is that using these tricks amounts to 'cheating', but in fact the creators specifically designed them to be used.

The learning slope accommodates an easy pace, with new game mechanics introduced in an easy-to-learn manner. Player death does not occur in the game (with one possible exception). And while it is possible to restart a level at any time, to do so will only reset the puzzle; players do not do restart a level because they have died or become stuck in an insoluble situation. Ludologically, the game becomes quite repetitive, especially in its second part, but the deep narrative prevents the player from quitting before the very end.

## *THE TURING TEST*: THE STORY

The player controls Ava Turing (what's in a name?), a female scientist onboard the space station Fortune, which is orbiting Jupiter's moon Europa in the year 2250. When contact with the ground crew is lost, Ava is awoken from cryostasis by Tom, the ship's Artificial Intelligence (A.I.). Tom sends her to the moon to investigate what has happened to her colleagues, who have apparently cut off all contact with Tom on the Fortune. When he is in the base on Europa, Tom (who 'travels' with Ava and stays in contact with her through the radio) observes that

the ground crew appears to have rearranged the layout of the base in order to create a massive Turing test, supposedly to keep Tom from re-establishing communication with the ground base and its crew. Tom mentions that the test was the reason that he took Ava with him to Europa: she is able to solve the puzzles that Tom cannot solve. The Turing test plays an important role in the narrative of this game, which is also named after it, but I will come to its significance later. For the moment, it suffices to say that computer intelligence is typically unable to pass this test.

As Ava slowly works her way through the Turing-test maze, which the ground team has set up for her and Tom, she gradually discovers the horrible tragedy that has taken place both on the Fortune and on Europa. The crew found an exo-organism called 'organism 119' in the icy rocks of the moon Europa. This organism's astonishing qualities include virus-like behavior which triggers the DNA of its host to replicate itself very quickly and without the gradual degeneration associated with becoming older. Organism 119 essentially makes its host immortal. Unfortunately for the crew, they experimented with the organism on themselves, making themselves relatively immortal. The International Space Agency decides that the crew will never be allowed to return to Earth because of the risks that bringing an exo-organism to Earth entails, especially an exo-organism with such unprecedented capabilities.

Eventually the crew rebelled against Tom, who is the enforcer of this involuntary quarantine. The ship's A.I. guarantees the continuation of the life-support systems (air, water and food), but makes it impossible for the crew to return to Earth. After a certain period of time, as Ava learns during the game through audio and video samples, emails and log books, the crew rebelled against Tom's omnipresence and absolute control by removing a brain-controlling chip from their arms. The situation has come to a standstill: Tom controls the space station and the life support for Europa, and the crew on Europa is trying to keep the A.I. out of their lives.

## HUMAN TRAGEDY

*The Turing Test* touches upon various philosophical and existential topics, the first of which is human tragedy. The crew is stranded on the moon Europa and the space station without any hope of ever returning home. Photographs and other private objects found in the living quarters of the space station are silent witnesses to the members' lost lives back home. One of the female crew members, Sarah, got pregnant and had a son, Minos. Unfortunately, the physical conditions far away from Earth prevented the embryo from developing properly, and Minos died shortly after birth. The captain of the crew, Daniel, committed suicide after giving Tom permission to use lethal force to prevent the crew

from returning to Earth. To quote Spock in Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan (Nicholas Meyer, US 1982), "Logic clearly dictates that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few (or the one)." But Star Trek also teaches us that it is all too human to try and break these laws of logic.

Because of the crew's confinement on Europa, its relative immortality has become a curse. What first appeared to the crew to be one of the greatest discoveries of humankind, the possibility of living forever, in fact means that its involuntary exile may continue for centuries. The reason Earth is unwilling to permit the return of the crew – contaminated as it is with organism 119 – to the planet is that the organism does not differentiate between good and bad. It revitalizes both good and bad organisms, both human DNA and cancer, as well as bacteria and viruses, in the same way. Death, *The Turing Test* ponders, may be something fearful, but it must not be eradicated altogether. Immortality is presumed to be a blessing, but it quickly turns into a horror.

Last but not least, crew members are only able to free themselves from Tom's influence by removing the chips from their arms. Unfortunately this leads to the loss of the whole forearm, leaving them handicapped for the rest of their days, which is pretty long given their contamination with organism 119. The organism repairs damaged DNA, but cannot re-grow an amputated limb. On a deeper level, the game hints at the notion that humankind can only free itself from its own dependence on ICT at the cost of great sacrifice.

## TESTING THE A.I.

The game *The Turing Test* is named after a test developed by Alan Turing in 1950 to assess the ability of any given A.I. to exhibit intelligent behavior to such an extent that humans cannot recognize the A.I. as such anymore. A typical test involves two humans (one a responder and the other the interrogator) and one A.I. (a responder). The interrogator poses questions to parties A and B, one of whom is a real human being, and the other the A.I. If the human interrogator cannot tell which of his two dialogue partners is the human, the A.I. is said to have passed the test. The A.I. is then considered to have some kind of 'consciousness' of the world and its own being. The game *The Turing Test* develops this concept on different levels.

Level 1. As has been seen, when Ava enters the base on Europa, the rooms seem to have been rearranged by the crew to form one giant Turing test. As Toms observes: 'These rooms are Turing tests … designed to tell humans and machines apart. Typical problems, only solvable by a human. A combination of logical and lateral thinking.' The player assumes that he or she controls Ava, whom Tom has called to the rescue as he is unable to solve the room puzzles; they were especially designed to keep him out.

Level 2. When Ava (or rather the player through her) learns of the implications of the microchips implanted in the bodies of the crew members (and therefore also in Ava's body), Ava becomes aware that she has not been co-operating with Tom – following his instructions – of her own free will, but that Tom has been controlling her through the chip. Ava first realizes this after Sarah lures her into a Faraday cage, where she is free of Tom's control. Sarah explains that the whole set-up of the puzzle rooms was to free Ava temporarily from Tom's mind control. In this light, Ava's last name, Turing, becomes even more meaningful.

Level 3. The discovery of the real nature of the relationship between Ava and Tom means that the player comes to realize that he or she has not been playing as Ava with Tom's help, but – narratologically speaking – as Tom controlling Ava. *The Turing Test* thus forces the reflection upon the player that Tom's manipulation of Ava (which the crew members and Ava clearly reject morally) is not that different from the player's own attitude in playing the game. One might well ask what the difference is between the in-game A.I. Tom, who manipulates Ava, and the out-game player who does the same (whether or not through Tom's agency).

This last reflection surfaces somewhere else in the game in a more explicit way, but it is necessary to be aware of the game's meta-story to see why it fits. Ava discovers an abandoned computer terminal in a semi-dark room in one of the not-so-secret 'restricted' rooms of the game. Finding a way to the restricted rooms is in itself a kind of Turing test, because the player has to think out-of-the-box to reach them, by optimally exploiting the game mechanics.

When activated by Ava, the computer announces that it does not believe you are human ('you' as Ava and as player). 'This Turing test is not for you to see if I am a robot. It is to see if you are.' Once the computer is convinced that you are a robot (and there is no way to prevent it reaching that conclusion), it does not matter anymore which keys on the keyboard you press. The same texts appear suggesting that neither Ava nor the player has free will. 'I am a drone. I am controlled by my programming. I have no free will.'

Another hint can be found in the crew's quarters. In Mikhail's room, there is a painting of a man, probably made by Mikhail himself (as there are painting tools strewn about the room). Mikhail's painting closely resembles 'Rembrandt's self-portrait', an image made in April 2016 (just before the release of the game) by an advanced computer, imitating the style and technique of the Dutch master to such a degree that experts could not distinguish it from a real painting. This could be seen as a visual Turing test, which explains its appearance in this game.

# A FINE LINE

Did any A.I. ever pass the Turing test? We could say that Tom passed. Although he claimed he needed Ava to pass it, he actually did so himself through Ava, controlling her with the mind chip in her arm. In a way, Ava did not solve the human-only puzzle rooms, Tom did. And although Ava thought she was in control, acting of her own free will, she was in fact an instrument of Tom.

On a deeper level, especially if we bear in mind the computer from the restricted area, it could be said that it was not Tom who was being tested and/or who passed the Turing test, but the player himself or herself. Successfully navigating through the game by solving all the puzzles, which were narratologically designed as a Turing test, the player has 'proved' himself or herself to be a human of flesh and blood, instead of an A.I. But we have to re-think this position when we return to the restricted-area computer, which continues to claim that you are a robot – both on the level of Ava/Tom and on the level of the player.

The Turing test has been criticized by experts for testing not the 'humanity' of the A.I. in question, but only the A.I.'s ability to deceive the human interrogator by pretending to be human. The most famous thought experiment in this field is that of the 'Chinese room', which also features in the game as one of the restricted areas. An English-speaking man (representing the A.I.) goes into this Chinese room; he has no knowledge of the Chinese language, but possesses a rulebook in English. Through a narrow window, a Chinese-speaking man delivers messages to the man inside. The non-Chinese man does not understand a word of these messages, but he is nevertheless able to deliver convincing answers to the man outside, using the manual, which instructs him how to answer in Chinese. The Chinese man outside thinks that he is having a conversation with another Chinese person inside, whereas the man inside has no idea of the nature of the conversation. The Chinese room experiment implies that it is not necessary for an A.I. to have any 'understanding' or 'consciousness' at all, as long as it has sufficient knowledge of the rules of human speech and speech interaction to be able to pretend to be human, just like the man inside the Chinese room.

Using both the Turing test and the Chinese room experiment, the player of *The Turing Test* might well reflect on the nature of being human through reversal of the A.I.'s perspective. Maybe language is indeed nothing more than a rule system we use to interact with one another, without truly understanding what each other is saying. Perhaps morality is nothing uniquely human, but is only a 'rule system', as Tom puts it in the game. And maybe creativity, often considered the most human quality of all, is, indeed, as Tom suggests, 'controlled chaos'. Tom states: 'You believe yourself to be a creative, but in mathematical

terms creativity is merely constrained chaos.' The game does not answer these questions, but stimulates the player to reflect on these issues.

*The Turing Test* is a very well designed game with good integration of narratological and ludological elements. Ludus and narratio are perfectly intertwined. The game leads the player to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of eternal life, the nature of human freedom, the interdependence of computers and humans in the contemporary world, and the very nature of humanity itself. Perhaps it is not the computer but human beings who should pass the Turing test.

## GAMEOGRAPHY

*Pneuma. Breath of Life* (Deco Digital & Bevel Studios, 2015).
*Portal* (Valve Corporation, 2007).
*Portal 2* (Valve Corporation, 2011).
*The Talos Principle* (Croteam, 2014).

## FILMOGRAPHY

Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan (Nicholas Meyer, US 1982).

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

# Book Review
# Sébastien Fevry/Serge Goriely/Arnaud Join-Lambert (eds.), Regards croisés sur *Incendies*

Du théâtre de Mouawad au cinéma de Villeneuve. Louvain-la-Neuve: L'Harmattan 2016, 138 pages, ISBN: 978-2-8061-0281-2

INCENDIES (FIRES, Denis Villeneuve, CN/FR 2011) is a feature film that offers striking interpretative resonances as we seek to understand extreme violence in the contemporary world, for it highlights religious legitimation, war, exile, the quest for identity, and the desire to stop this destructive, nihilistic turmoil. Through the art of film, this outstanding work establishes a disturbing tension between the realistic images of film and the universalization of violence as an aspect of the human condition.

The film deals with the excessively violent heritage of a female character, Nawal Marwan, during a civil war in an undefined Near Eastern country. Having lived through an endless series of highly traumatic experiences that included the murder of her lover by her brothers, the abandonment of her first child, a massacre, the killing of a party leader, jail, torture, rape, and the birth of her twins in jail, Marwan finally leaves her country for Canada, where she raises her children, works as a secretary, and eventually dies. In an unconventional testament, she calls on her twins, Jeanne and Simon, to confront their origins, for posthumously she asks them to find their father and brother and give them a letter.

In narrating their quest for their unknown relatives in a world on which violence has left indelible marks, the film analyses the response to their terrifying inheritance by a generation born in exile, by people both geographically and psychologically distant from the war and its consequences. The film expresses in a metaphorical and universal tragic language the challenge of confronting such a violent history. The film's references to civil war function variously, with its presentation of war realistic but unspecific. The film itself is an adaptation of the stageplay *Incendies* by Lebanese author Wajdi Mouawad, first performed in 2003.

The film does not adopt the step-by-step narrative of the play. Instead, it responds to the play by exploring tragedy as a possible framework for expressing the constraints and challenges of the human condition as it encounters war and

collective and individual violence. How can people living in exile understand and overcome a heritage of revenge and violent annihilation? How can they deal with the merciless circumstances of their birth?

The volume under review discusses the film INCENDIES (2011) in an interdisciplinary setting and presents the results of a project by Cinespi, a research group dedicated to film, religion, and spirituality that is based at the Université catholique de Louvain (see https://www.uclouvain.be/360857.html). The book offers deep insight not only into the film, its complex narrative structure, and stylistic choices for images and sound, but also into the screenplay. Furthermore, the comparison with the different versions of Mouawad's play allows an interpretation of the film in dialogue with the text of the drama and with the varied performances of the play on stage. In the edited volume, the film is contextualized within the filmography of Canadian director Denis Villeneuve and considered in light of reception processes around the world.

Drawn from a variety of disciplines, the contributions are part of a systematic, well-structured approach to the complexity of the film and to its inspiration in both history and the theatre. Viewed in this light, the volume can be considered an outstanding example of a successful, stimulating interdisciplinary exchange between theology, ethics, media, cinema and performance studies, French literature, and mathematics.

The first contribution, by Serge Goriely, introduces the different references in INCENDIES, to history, particularly to the civil war in Lebanon, and to Mouawad's play. By highlighting the stylistic and technical characteristics of the filmic adaptation, he stresses the film's independent contribution as it forms a complex relationship with the theatre. The comparison between film and play is embedded in a revealing discussion of theoretical works, particularly those of Gilles Deuleuze and André Bazin.

The comparison between theatre and film is enriched by an illuminating analysis of the screenplay that is seen as a further aspect of the inter-medial project developed around *Incendies*. Sensitive to the tension between theatre as text and theatre as performance on stage and analysing transformations of the screenplay during the production of the film, Gabrielle Tremblay understands the adaption of the theatre play as a dynamic process.

The next chapters are dedicated to analysis of the film. Sylvie Bissonnette considers the use of character doubles within Villeneuve's work. Aurélie Palud scrutinises the strategy deployed in INCENDIES, in particular at the aesthetic level, to stage the uncovering of the truth and the related transformation. Arnaud Join-Lambert's article concentrates on the role and significance of the notary, a central character in the film, who assumes a sacred connotation. The chapters by Sébastien Fevry and Marc Klugkist respond to the function and significance of genre aspects in this film, a "tragedy" in classical terms, with explicit refer-

ences to the figure of Oedipus. Jean Van Schaftingen's contribution explains the dramaturgic role of mathematics in Incendies. Jeanne, one of the protagonists, is a mathematician, and mathematical problems are combined with the narrative on many levels. The discussion of the mathematical problems that are staged within the film and Van Schaftingen's diegesis therefore offer deep insight into the construction of the film. The chapter by Jean-Luc Maroy focuses on explicit religious references in Incendies, not only in the form of explicit religious symbols, but also in the interaction between religious communities and violence, with fundamental categories such as "revelation" and "promise" crucial. The analysis of Villeneuve's film is completed by the contribution by Walter Lesch, who reads the filmic narration from an ethical perspective and focuses on the role of the testament and its essential function in sustaining the characters in their search for identity.

The volume concludes with research by Patricia Cortes on the reception of the film by selected groups of women in Bolivia.

The well-written essays are worth reading, but the volume is worth more than the sum of its parts. Taken as a collective project, the book as a whole highlights the artistic complexity of the different forms of staging for Mouawad's theatrical play. The film appears as a narrative and aesthetic performance in dialogue with the text and mise-en-scènes of *Incendies*. This broader inter-medial project is presented as an artistic attempt to deal with universal and crucial aspects of the human condition, especially in the specific context of religiously motivated violence. In this sense, the book emphasises the ability of the arts to elaborate historical experience.

This volume is recommended highly, not only as a critical reading of the work of Villeneuve and Mouawad, but also as a stepping stone in preparing academic courses on religion, violence, and exile.


## FILMOGRAPHY

Incendies (Fires, Denis Villeneuve, CN/FR 2011).

Baldassare Scolari

# Book Review
# Anna Neumaier, religion@home? Religionsbezogene Online-Plattformen und ihre Nutzung

Eine Untersuchung zu neuen Formen gegenwärtiger Religiosität, Würzburg: Ergon 2016, 478 pages, ISBN: 978-3-95650-141-8

In her dense and extensive book, Anna Neumaier examines new forms of contemporary religiosity in German-speaking Christian online forums and asks about the conditions, forms and consequences of religious Internet usage. On one hand, she examines forms of religiosity, the media properties that characterize communication and social exchange in online forums as well as the topics discussed and emerging forms of socialization. On the other hand, she analyzes the relation of all that to contemporary religiosity as a whole. Following a suggestion made by Mia Lövheim, Neumaier provides an innovative comparison of online forums and alternative offline offerings in order to bring to light similarities and differences between "different places of religious exchange" (18). Neumaier's investigation is located in the research context of the study of transformations of media and religion and deals in particular with questions of thresholds and flexibility, individualization and communitization, visibility and invisibility, and public and private spheres for religion and religiosity. Thus, the author examines and links three research fields: systematic consideration of religious online offers, investigation of the connections between online and offline religious offerings and usage, and general theories on contemporary religious transformation.

The methodological basis of the survey is presented in the second chapter and follows the principles of grounded theory. The research subjects were 20 online discussion forums, which were analyzed with regard to content and media characteristics. These forums were used to contact and select interview partners, resulting in 34 qualitative interviews, 23 of which were evaluated; Neumaier also undertook a quantitative survey among forum users. The third chapter discusses continuities and discontinuities in the interaction of religion, society and media, as well as the relevance of research on religion on the Internet. The fourth chapter addresses the Internet and, in particular, religious online forums as the concrete field of study, with the main results from the empirical investigation introduced.

Chapter five expounds the results from analysis of interviewees' introductory narratives. The first question posed to interviewees was: "How and in what circumstances did you come to the forum, and why are you still there?" (211). Based on analysis of the narratives, the author elaborates seven categories of answer, which are sketched and discussed: (1) narrative of the user's general technological, biographical and religious contexts; (2) narrative of specific triggers that caused the user to enter the forum; (3) description of the specific entry into the forum; (4) description of first impressions; (5) summary narrative of different phases of intensity of participation; (6) reviews of the forums; (7) self-descriptions and arguments regarding specifics of usage.

Chapter six discusses classical and modern theories and approaches to social forms, in particular those conceptualized as community, group and network. On the basis of her empirical findings, Neumaier outlines the reasons for her preference for the community concept and identifies three ideal types (in the Weberian sense of the term) of community – "faith-siblings", "forum family" and "conflict arena". While the "faith-siblings" pattern is characterized by the correlation of the users' search for like-minded people with reference to an overarching Christian community, the communicative exchange in the mode of the "forum family" is characterized in particular by cohesion and clearer boundaries: in a strict sense, only members of the "family" are users of the forum. The third pattern, the "conflict arena", is characterized by playful competition in the users' interactions, a form of community deemed "post-traditional" (as conceptualized by Ronald Hitzler) and "fluid" (as conceptualized by Dorothea Lueddeckens), since it is temporary, with affiliation oriented to individual interests, and consequently "potentially precarious" (325). Thus, according to the author, the social forms observed in the forums range from classic social concepts (Max Weber and Ferdinand Tönnies) to modern conceptions like that of the post-traditional community. One principal outcome of the study is its highlighting of the close connection between the religious affiliation of users, the importance of social interactions to them, and the role of religion in the context of Internet use and community formation. In particular, Neumaier shows that the religious imprinting of users (i.e., their socialization outside the online forums) influences the community-based interpretation of online forums.

The seventh chapter focuses on the users' narratives in order to identify and discuss their biographical and motivational embedding. The author presents the results of the empirical analysis in the form of four ideal-type models of usage. All narratives emphasize the inadequacies and dysfunctionalities of religious offline offerings (primarily of churches and local religious communities) as central reasons for online usage, and the author therefore defines these

explanations as deficit-narratives (in German, *Mangelerzählungen*). Primarily decisive are not the characteristics of the online forums, but the problems of the offline offerings. The users criticize or complain about (a) the incompatibility with the demands of modern life and work of participation modalities in religious institutions and organizations, (b) individual negative experiences with hometown religious communities and/or churches, (c) lack of space for religious exchange and increasing "levels of organization of the churches" (352) and (d) the lack of religious expertise. Finally, Neumaier describes the general tabooization of religion as a fifth, all-embracing deficit-narrative, with reference not to local religious communities or churches, but to the interviewees' non-religious environment.

In the eighth chapter, the deficit-narratives are subsumed under the axis, or key category, of "destabilization", which is intended to serve as a common explanation. This category is a product of actual conditions, especially the well-known dissatisfaction with offline offerings. Online usage is therefore conceptualized as a "strategy of homeostasis" or re-stabilization: "Existing convictions are to be secured against imminent uncertainty or restored in the face of a destabilization already in progress" (415). Two interesting results can be highlighted here. First, Neumaier observes that, despite time-consuming and dedicated use of online forums, the "shift" in faith orientation of users is only small: online forums are in large part used to restore, stabilize or deepen existing beliefs. Secondly, despite intensive and regular exchange with other users, the individual's faith remains largely a private matter: "Religious convictions are now in the innermost of the individual … Communities, forums, and the family can serve to a varying extent as a place of exchange on religion-related issues, but the influence of this exchange on individual religiosity is classified as marginal – religion is restabilized, not transformed" (420).

In the ninth, and final, chapter, Neumaier relates the results of the empirical analysis to the broader theoretical investigative concept. First, she highlights that the use of online forums leads not to increasingly fluid contacts, but, on the contrary, to more long-term and stable interactions (exceptions can be found partly in the exchange mode characterized as the "conflict arena"). Second, she points out that as a new social space the Internet challenges current ways of conceptualizing the private/public dichotomy. In fact, Neumaier observes that even in areas which are normally understood as belonging to the private sphere, such as family and partnership, the possibility for exchange about religion and of religious communication is perceived as deficient; online forums serve as a spatial substitute. Third, with regard to the distinction between visibility and invisibility, she observes that whereas the fundamental visibility of online exchange is beneficial for those users who want to spread their

convictions, forums are not used as a place for intimate concerns. Thus, the visibility of the exchange makes the subject-related religious exchange more difficult. At the same time, however, knowledgeable exchange about religion tendentially detached from individual convictions and experiences is stimulated. Fourth, Neumaier shows that the online forums not only can be described as a social network, but also fulfill characteristics of communities, inasmuch as she observes the presence of shared practices, values and a sense of togetherness/belonging. Finally, Neumaier again points out that the central and decisive reason, given by the users themselves, for turning to online forums is the lack of exchange possibilities in offline spaces, primarily in local religious communities and churches. Finally, she emphasizes that the Internet is a place for stabilizing restoration but does not lead to fundamental changes and transformations of religious convictions.

One of the great merits of Anna Neumaier's study is the finding that online forums should not be understood as separate spaces for religious communication and/or exchange about religion, but forms an interdependent relationship with other, more "traditional", social spaces. By means of a consistent and stringent interweaving of theory and empirical work, she elaborates categories and questions which will surely be very fruitful for further investigation of religious interactions and communication in online forums and generally on the Internet. Perhaps the only shortcoming of the study is that one rarely gets an insight into the concrete topics that are discussed and dealt with within the forums. Although study of the actual communication and language forms referring to specific problems, facts, emotions and events is not one of the declared goals of the investigation, its inclusion might have led to an expansion of the research horizon, allowing the question of the transformation of religion to be reshaped. We might speculate that the transformation of religion does not take place mainly at the level of the beliefs and convictions expressed by users, but rather at the level of language, in semantic and rhetorical patterns. It could be extremely fruitful to examine how certain political, cultural, social and economic events or developments are reflected and represented in online forums. A further interesting question would be whether semantic and rhetorical patterns in online forums differ from those used in communication in other social spaces, and, if so, how and why. But perhaps one of the many merits of Neumaier's study lies precisely in its having created space for such questions. Because the author convincingly demonstrates that use of online forums is equivalent to a "backward movement in the restoration of stable religiosity" (438), the question of the transformation of religion is shifted away from the domain of the subject and the subject's attitude and toward the domain of language and religious forms of representation.

Christian Wessely

# Game Review
# Samorost 3 (Puzzle)
Amanita Design, 2016

A review of *Samorost 3* (the basic version can be downloaded from the Amanita site for €20) fits perfectly in an issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* that deals mainly with comics and comic movie adaptations because this game draws most of its fascination from comic-like characteristics. I will do my best to avoid spoilers whilst hiding my enthusiasm for this incredible token of creativity.

Being into computer games since 1983 (on a C64 then, trying hard to endure more than three levels of *Impossible Mission*), I have encountered a good number of concepts and ideas. In the past I saw a lot of bad ideas sold with overwhelming graphical power, as well as great ideas that suffered from a weak game concept. Over the last two years I have had little time to play, but then a friend showed me *Samorost 3* on his Mac – the very next day, I bought the game, and I played it over the following weeks.

## THE GAME PLOT

In the native Czech language of the developers, *samorostly* means something like 'unspoilt' or 'genuine', and, indeed, the player starts somewhere in an Arcadian landscape with blossoming trees, a flowery lawn, grazing rabbits and a sleeping dog (see fig. 1). All of a sudden, a horn drops from the starry heaven and startles the dog, which starts barking. Its owner, a small white figure, is awakened by the noise and comes out of the observatory-like tower he lives in. Closer


Fig. 1: The player's character in his home.

inspection of the horn reveals that it can be used as a hearing aid and a music instrument. At this point, the player takes over control of the white dwarf and starts to explore the environment, which turns out to be the surface of a small planet.

With the help of the horn, the player can now find out what features parts of the planet provide. Somewhere down in the rocky valleys lives, for example, a gifted engineer and remarkable welder who might even build a small spaceship if he just had the leisure to stroll around and collect the components one needs for such a project (see fig. 2). Solving interactive riddles in other areas of this planet produces a pocketknife from a mushroom picker, a plant, some levers from a ruin and a discarded plastic bottle, which seem perfect components for that job.



Fig. 2: The Gyro Gearloose of the Samorost Universe.

That task complete, the player is able to leave the planet and visit other stellar objects to solve other riddles which may involve intoxicating substances (see fig. 3). Along the way, why most of the planets are devastated or ruined becomes evident: obviously, a beast is hidden even in this miraculous world(s) and poses a constant threat to the few intact spots. Far from being a hero, the player (i.e., the white dwarf) starts to gather more information and tokens in order to find – after a long journey and some really difficult riddles – the location of the literally sleeping beast and the location of a hero, who must be awoken to fight the dragon.

Fig. 3: Hospitality for the hero: a teahouse of a different kind

## GAME DETAILS

The game developer, Amanita Design, is based in the Czech Republic. The company was founded in 2003 by Jakub Dvorsky, and now consists of nine members, about the size of a regular family business. Amanita Design is well known for its fancy graphics and creative illustrations, but also does music videos and websites. It uses Adobe AIR for the development and distribution of *Samorost 3*, and thereby ensures that it runs on a great variety of platforms.

The hardware prerequisites are mid-level. On my i5 6200u / 2.3 GHz with Intel HD520 graphics chip, the game runs smoothly even on the 4K display, with neither flickering nor clicking disturbing the game experience. The user interface is simple: a point-and-click system controls the white dwarf and the tokens/persons he interacts with. The menu provides the usual options: save, load, game preferences, and a hint book, which is a piece of art by itself, a small game within the game.

The graphics are really impressive. I have hardly ever seen such an accumulation of colorful Neverlands that are so enchanting. Colors, proportions, scales, sounds … everything blends together seamlessly. Also, the music is more than just an accessory: both score and "instrumentation" are essential – I use quotation marks as only a part of the sounds is obviously related to known natural instruments – and it really helps if one recognizes a theme heard before in another place.

## MY OPINION

What fascinates me so with *Samorost 3* (and has done from the very first moment) is the complete absence of text, written or spoken. In a sense *Samorost 3* is a mute adventure. It contains noise effects that are very well made, interesting music, made with craftsmanship, and babbling sounds when someone is speaking, but nothing one actually understands. The communication is partly shifted to a highly symbolic level – icons appear in speech balloons, and riddles have to be solved in inserted subscreens (see fig. 2 and 4). And no lesser part is played by music: listening and repeating musical motives and manipulating various tokens, from ropes to bugs' antennae (see fig. 5), to produce sound sequences are vital for the game to progress.



Fig. 4: When charmed by the horn, the plant answers.

On the surface *Samorost 3* is non-violent. I was unable to provoke a killing. The player cannot die; if one is unable to solve a riddle, one simply gets stuck in the environment. However, death is somehow present: the wastelands on some planets speak of catastrophes that may have happened, and the antagonist and his creature have to be defeated in order to save this little universe, a task delegated, however, to the (mechanical) hero, whom the player has to awake. Here is a wonderful example of the sacrificial process René Girard has described. So, in the end, for all its fascination *Samorost 3* remains stuck in a scapegoat mecha-

Fig. 5: Antenna music solves a riddle.

nism, but this characteristic is possibly a prerequisite of any computer game that goes beyond Tetris.

*Samorost 3* is not suitable for children under the age of eight, not because of any violence that might be encountered (there is none), but because the riddles generally require, I believe, not only profound logical thinking but also some knowledge of traditional iconography. Several religious aspects are interwoven with the game. Structurally, one could read the game as the mythological Hero's Journey described by Joseph Campbell. However, the white dwarf's complete renunciation of violence and fighting brings a new note to this approach. The initiation rite represented by the journey is highly symbolic, but it works, since in the end the white dwarf (i.e., the player) is accepted into the small circle of monks, to play music with them.

These monks are drawn in a form typical of the average Western mind's conception of Buddhist clerics: dressed in orange robes, they dwell in a peaceful nature and are busy caring for nature and studying the scriptures (see fig. 6). There is, however, something very uncanny about them. It turns out that the evil counterpart of the player is a monk himself, his face badly blemished and obviously suffering (see fig. 7). Apparently, he was once a member of the community, but this community was not strong enough to give him shelter after whatever had happened to him. He became – actively or passively – an outcast, and thus his rage takes on a human and understandable character. This is not a glorious chapter for the small congregation.

What about a Jesuanic interpretation of the player and his mission? In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul states, 'God hath chosen the foolish things

Fig. 6: Walking, working, writing: wise men in orange robes.


Fig. 7: The antagonist is badly blemished.

of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty' (1 Cor 1:27, KJV). Salvation comes from the weak, from a child-like figure that has no power at all and yet is able to make the mightiest and wisest bow before it. The analogy is neat, but so wrong: the white dwarf is weak in himself, but he hires a powerful fighter to finish off the antagonistic figure. Amanita Design missed a chance here. They could have bent the storyline to a new kind of ending, better matched with the

extraordinary concept of the game. But would it work? It might, but it might well not, for the audience wants a heroic story even if it is clothed in camouflage (or here, in white).

## CONCLUSION

*Samorost 3* contains a bonanza of ideas, of beautiful pictures, of great music and interesting sound. It is fun to play, and sometimes it is relaxing just to sit back and watch the animation, enjoying ever-new glimpses of enormous creativity. I would discourage someone who is into shooters and/or fast action with spectacular 3-D effects and sophisticated control mechanisms from buying this game. However, for someone who prefers smart riddles, great graphics, marvellous music and an almost meditative (i.e., absolutely relaxing) game, *Samorost 3* is, no doubt, one of the best choices currently available.

## GAMEOGRAPHY

*Impossible Mission* (Epyx, 1984).

# Calls for Papers

# Trauma, Memory and Religion

## Representing Memories of Killing in Film

In the last few years, two influential films were released that dealt with the memories of men who had killed people a very long time ago. Although Das radikal Böse (DE/AU Stefan Ruzowitzky, D 2013) and The Act of Killing (Joshua Oppenheimer, NO/DK/GB 2012) re-enact massacres performed in countries distant from each other, the works show astonishing similarities. In both films the killers were haunted by images popping up in their nightmares, depicting the angst and despair of their victims. Is this kind of reaction by the killers a universal human phenomenon when faced with such horrible events? Or is it a cinematic device to express the sense of guilt? How is the memory of the traumatic experience of killing represented in film?

Das radikal Böse, which won an award at the Jerusalem Film Festival in 2014, focuses on the question how ordinary German soldiers could become the murderers of Jewish civilians, including men, women and children. During their military campaigns in Eastern Europe in 1941 and 1942 they killed two millions people with rifles and pistols.

The Act of Killing received the BAFTA Film Award for the best documentary in 2014. It uses the technique of role-playing to allow the feelings of the murderers to come to the surface. Two years later, Joshua Oppenheimer made a second film, The Look of Silence (NO/DK/GB 2014), in which he recaptures the same killings but from the perspective of the victims.

Both in Das radikal Böse and in The Act of Killing a religious dimension is discernable, in which apparently a certain difference comes to light: depending on the religion tradition, different strategies to express the responsibility of the killers are presented. In Das radikal Böse, which is embedded in the Protestant Lutheran tradition, the actors speak about feeling guilty, while in The Act of Killing the actors, mostly Muslim Indonesians who also have some roots in local indigenous religions, relate to God's inevitable punishment. Which role does

religion play in this context? Is it religion that introduces differences between the ways of coping with massacres?

This issue of **JRFM** is devoted to films in which trauma, memory and religion are interwoven and encourages interdisciplinary approaches to this topic with particular consideration for psychology, film studies and comparative religion. We are inviting articles that

- analyse the religious dimension in the above mentioned films or in other productions from all over the world,
- address intercultural dimensions and/or gender differences in films dealing with the topic of trauma, memory and religion, and / or
- focus on the role of sound in this kind of films and its religious significance.

The issue has also an open section for articles on other topics linked to the profile of **JRFM**.

Contributions of 25,000-30,000 characters (including spaces) should be submitted online for peer review by November 28, 2017 through the journal homepage www.jrfm.eu. We kindly ask authors to register. Publication is scheduled for May 2018.

For any questions regarding the call for papers or the submission and publication process, please contact the office manager of **JRFM** (gerda.weinzerl@uni-graz.at).

# "Who, Being Loved, is Poor?"

## Material and Media Dimensions of Wedding

Wedding rituals are performed as a "rite de passage" in diverse cultures and within religious as well as secular contexts in manifold variations. The temporal horizon of the marriage vow might be forever and eternal, until death breaks the couple apart, or just temporary. The ritual can include only two persons or several, groom and bride, two grooms or two brides or a multiplicity of persons in any constellation. For some time now, weddings have become events, a big business with fairs, wedding planners and specific products for the special day(s). Media representations influence the look and performance of weddings, how the festivities are orchestrated and celebrated. And at the same time, many couples are looking for alternative expressions of the wedding ritual.

The **J**RFM 2018 4/2 is inviting articles considering the material and media dimension of the wedding ritual. We welcome both historical and contemporary case studies, diachronic and synchronic approaches to questions as:

- The link between tradition, innovation and change in religious rituals und motifs.
- Representation, political and economic dimensions, race, gender and ethnicity of weddings.
- The visual and material context of the production and consumption of the ritual.
- A wide range of media – films, from short documentaries to reality shows and fiction, clothing, festivities before, during and after the wedding, etc.
- Also normative aspects of marriage with their impact on LGBTIQ communities, intercultural or interreligious couples can be considered.

This issue of **JRFM** will be devoted to visual, audio-visual and material dimensions of the practices surrounding weddings from a diversity of cultures, religious traditions, and spiritual movements. It encourages interdisciplinary approaches to this topic with particular consideration for the study of religion, visual anthropology, film and media studies, theology, and comparative religion.

The issue has also an open section for articles on other topics linked to the profile of **JRFM**. Contributions of 25,000-30,000 characters (including spaces) should be submitted online for peer review by February 28, 2018 through the journal homepage www.jrfm.eu. We kindly ask authors to register. Publication is scheduled for November 2018. For any questions regarding the call for papers or the submission and publication process, please contact the office manager of **JRFM** (gerda.weinzerl@uni-graz.at).