

American Gods: *Fanboys and Superheroes in the Twentieth Century*



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Fanboys and Superheroes in the Twentieth Century*

In J.J. Abrams's film *Super 8* (2011), six teenagers save a small Ohio town from an extraterrestrial threat. The film opens with the funeral of Joe Lamb's mother. Following her death, Joe's father Jack, a local sheriff's deputy, instructs Joe to attend baseball camp. Jack does not like Joe's friends because they make horror movies instead of playing sports. Joe defies his father's wishes and his group heads to a local train station to film their entry for an amateur film competition. While they are filming, one of their teachers, Mr. Woodard, derails a U.S. Air Force transport and lets an alien creature out of its cage. The monster soon begins to wreak havoc on the small town. Joe and the other boys risk their lives to save Alice, a female friend, from the alien. In the course of saving her, they discover that the alien means to return to his home-world and that Mr. Woodard was trying to release it when he drove onto the tracks to derail the train. Joe is able to empathize with the alien's feelings of loneliness and loss and ultimately helps the creature rebuild his ship and leave Earth.

Super 8 presents the now familiar story of the late twentieth century teenaged fanboy – a young, nerdy kid, who reads comic books, watches *Star Wars*, makes his own horror films, and is consumed by fantasy. These predilections are often the result of or result in ostracization by his peers. J. J. Abrams's *Super 8* is a useful entrée into the fan world. While fan communities have existed in various forms throughout history, the 1980s fanboy helped ferry the thoughts and themes of their culture to mainstream American and to the world community. *Super 8* exposes the link between childhood, loneliness, and fantasies of empowerment that fuel many fanboy productions. These tropes resonated in many different communities. The desire to consume fantasies of empowerment

contributed to the proliferation of fanboy culture in the late twentieth century. By the early twenty-first century, the culture had grown to be one of the most lucrative and influential cultural institutions in the American entertainment industry.

The political and social transformations of the 1960s and 70s helped spread fanboy culture. Transformations in quality of life, definitions of citizenship, and Cold War politics all profoundly affected American social, political and cultural institutions of power. These forces contributed to what President Jimmy Carter called “malaise.” Others have identified the forces of malaise as indicators of a cultural “crisis” in which Americans (and potentially others) developed anxiety about the stability of hegemonic masculinity and the power that emanated from the institutions associated with it. As fan culture responded to this crisis, the hopes, fears, dreams and nightmares of the American fanboy became the hopes, fears, dreams and nightmares of many American people and arguably, the hopes and fears of “America.”

Growing up in the 1980s, was therefore, a condition of acclimating to these fantasies – of digesting the narratives of heroism and villainy that defined fan culture and in one way or another integrating them into a sense of self. As will become clear, early fans communicated with each and shared certain important experiences, but were by and large a disaggregated group of people who read and viewed similar things, but lacked the means to communicate with one another. Initially, they comprised a loosely organized community that was not necessarily strong enough to recognize its own cultural power. By the 1980s fanboys had claimed an identity as members communicated with each other and interacted with mainstream cultures. Consequently, reading, watching and playing transitioned from recreation to habit.

This paper is about fanboys; it follows their struggles and triumphs, examines their heroes and villains and explores their early rise to the pinnacle of cultural power. It will also inevitably consider the mainstream in an attempt to understand how fanboy culture provided both fanboys and non-fanboys with a medium through which they could fantasize about decisive responses to the crisis of confidence in heterosexual white male masculinity in the wake of certain political and social developments in the late twentieth century; the Cold War, the civil rights movements, and the transitions to post-industrial capitalism. It will examine the ways Frank Miller retooled one of fandom's greatest heroes, Batman, for the 1980s and outfitted him with the weapons needed to combat the forces of malaise, first for his fanboy readers and then for greater reading and viewing audiences. Through analysis of how Batman was reimagined and reanimated (both literally and figuratively) in the 1980s, I will document how Batman, his allies and enemies, and the world in which he lived reenacted and resolved this crisis of faith in white middle class male identity. Fanboy culture and its hero, Batman in his literary and cinematic renderings in the 1980s, provided Americans with models for both understanding the aggregate forces fueling this crisis in white hetero masculinity and provided them with a narrative through which they could imagine a resolution to that crisis.

Playing With the Big Boys

In *Manhood In America*, Michael Kimmel explores the various potential understandings "masculinity." Kimmel explains that though an integrated, singular example of masculinity does not exist in the real world, there are imagined visions of perfect Masculinity (and femininity) that govern our understandings of manliness and

womanliness.¹ He distinguishes between *manhood* – the lived experiences of everyday men with their distinct gender identities of those people who consider themselves male – and *Masculinity*, which is an imagined, non-realistic paradigm, “against which we all measure ourselves.”² Ironically (or perhaps not ironically), the tension between the two – the everyday men with their identity politics, and the mythical Man (who is undoubtedly white, straight and middle-class, northern but not ethnic, strong but not abusive, athletic but not monstrous, and intelligent but not cerebral) – defines the masculine experience in America. The experience is paired with two other forces that exist between men – homosociality and homophobia. *Homosociality*, the relationships men have with other men in order to prove their own Masculinity, and *homophobia*, men’s fears that other men will disprove their Masculinity, shape the male experience: “Manhood,” Kimmel says, “is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us.”³

If fear of disempowerment is an implicit aspect of manhood, then men will always be in crisis. Crises of masculinity are therefore what James Gilbert calls *episodic* notions, discursive phenomena that reappear over and over again, bringing with them new meanings and contours with each manifestation.⁴ Crisis is a potentially misleading term however, because fears about power and impotence, though at times counterproductive, nevertheless have vast generative powers. Crisis is therefore not merely a time in which

¹ For the purposes of this paper, Masculinity will refer to this imagined archetypal masculinity that does not necessarily exist in the real world, while masculinity refers to the everyday lived experiences of regular men.

² Kimmel, Michael, *Manhood in America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, pg 5-6. Kimmel’s argument here is that despite differences of race, class, etc, *all* men measure their Masculinity against a paradigm that is white, heterosexual and affluent.

³ Kimmel, 5-6

⁴ Gilbert, James, *A Cycle of Outrage*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 4

men bite their nails and await catastrophe. Crisis is a condition through which men face their fears about impotence and engage the process of mythogenesis.

Obviously in the common era, with cellular and microchip technology, it is hardly possible to think of *mythology* in the same way it might be used to speak of archaic religious practices and etiological parables. Nor do I intend myth to mean small or trivial potential fallacies. True mythologies have an utterly different place in our world – they are complex networks of tropes and characters that express our ideals. Myths help us understand who we are and what we believe in and why we believe at all. And we are constantly engaged in the process of myth-making. According to Richard Slotkin, true myths are born in the individual consciousness but immediately set to work on uniting individuals into a “collective identity.” Slotkin argues that a myth that “ceases to evoke [a] religious response ceases to function as a myth,” but a story that survives numerous retellings and maintains its “evocative power” becomes a myth.⁵

Slotkin differentiates between the “mythopoeic mode of consciousness” – the process by which myths are created – and the “myth artifact” – the vehicle by which the architect of the myth conveys his or her meaning, be it a story or work of art. Myth artifacts have three basic components: the hero, the universe and the narrative. The hero is the figure with whom people identify – Hercules, Annie Oakley or, for the purposes of this study, Bruce Wayne. The universe is a representation of the real world, though morally simpler, and supernatural. Dante’s journey through Hell has important real-world comparisons, just as Gotham City is an analog for the American metropolis. Dichotomous forces of absolute good and evil often govern the myth-universe. The hero faces evil kings and dark gods, usually in defense of innocence and righteousness. In cautionary tales,

⁵ Slotkin, Richard, *Regeneration Through Violence*, Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973, 8. Myths that fail to take hold are not myths at all.

evildoers are punished for injustice and wrongdoing. Both of these archetypal stories and the myriad of others present in the mythos are told through the narrative.⁶

Slotkin plays with the idea of *monomyth* presented by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. According to Campbell, all myths stemmed from one archetype – “the myth of initiation”:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.⁷

The many complexities of the global mythos are far more complex than Campbell, and, perhaps, Slotkin would have us believe. Lawrence and Jewett argue in favor of the monomyth, but claim that myth-artifacts evolved during the American industrial revolution to tell stories about redemption rather than initiation.⁸ But it is not difficult to search through the mythos to find examples of mythic narratives that speak of other significant human trials: initiation and redemption to be sure, but also myths of salvation, punishment, remuneration and catastrophe. Myths reflect the totality of human experience and are a way for people to engage with abstract questions of existence.

But what is the roll of play in the mythogenic process? Play it would seem is often the birthplace of myth. Play is the main process by which a community engages the germ of a mythopoeic idea. As Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown argue, “play provides the opportunity to leap, experiment, fail and continue to play with different outcomes...”⁹ To Thomas and Brown, game play is a fundamental part of the learning process. It is, “a

⁶ Slotkin, 8-9

⁷ Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008 (third edition), pg 23

⁸ Lawrence and Jewett

⁹ Thomas, Douglas and John Seely Brown, *The New culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change*, Lexington, KY: CreateSpace Publishing, 2011, 98

way of engaging in complicated negotiations of meaning, interaction and competition, not only for entertainment, but also for creating meaning.”¹⁰ From the simplest to the most complex games, the individual engages his or her knowledge of the mythos and employs it to recreate the real world in their own imagined design. From teacher, to cops and robbers, to elaborate board games and of course video and computer games, game play is the easiest way for the individual to access the mythos and evoke its “religion.”

If, as Slotkin suggests, access is the principal requirement for a myth-artifact to become mythic, then play is one of, if not the most important methods by which people access the mythos. Play and storytelling are both integral to the learning process, and as such occur more frequently during childhood. By engaging in both, children access the elements of the mythos and integrate it into their own experience. Additionally, cultural material aimed at children across the developmental spectrum, from reading Doctor Seuss to playing World of Warcraft, constantly invokes the “religious” aspects of the mythos, adding to children’s understandings. By the time they reach young adulthood, children are steeped in the mythos.

Bearing this in mind, it is possible to understand why the elements of fanboy culture might present such cogent and compelling narratives for both children and adults alike. Fanboy culture provides children and young adults with a veritable smorgasbord of material to choose from. Comics, fantasy games, science fiction and fantasy films and video games are robust myth-artifacts. Comics and games are not merely didactic; they also offer adults a refuge into which they can retreat to shelter themselves from the harshness of reality. They also provided an alternative to the narratives of failure that came to populate the late twentieth century.

¹⁰ Thomas and Brown, 97

Chapter One will follow the development of fanboy culture from its genesis in the world of early twentieth century American immigrant and urban youth culture, through its journey to the American heartland to its arrival in Hollywood by the end of the 1970s, and ultimately to the shelves of American book stores following the release of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*. In it, I will examine the lives of certain key figures in the fan community, congressional action, press coverage and history written by the major producers of fan culture to create a biographical sketch of the fan as he appeared in the early 1980s. Additionally, I will discuss certain problems" that directed the cross-country journey and helped land the characters of the fanboy fantasy in living rooms across the nation. I will also consider how the development of fantasy gaming – from pen and paper role-playing games (RPGs) to platform based video games – and certain developments in film bolstered fan culture and provided the mechanism for its introduction into the mainstream.

Chapter Two will be a reading of one of the foundational texts of 1980s fan culture. In its initial run, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* changed the way that the comic book world looked at itself and the way the non-fans regarded the medium. I would like to use Chapter Two to explore the mythogenic process at work in the mid-1980s. *The Dark Knight Returns* offers an interesting opportunity to explore that process and to consider how cultural mythology can be remade in light of political and social developments.

In 2011, American popular culture has become dominated by productions that would traditionally be directed to fanboys. In film and television, young adult literature, and video games, vampires, superheroes and wizards have become an incredibly lucrative force in the culture. Their transition from the depths of subculture to the mainstream was not an inevitable conclusion in the early 1970s. By the end of the decade and certainly by

1986, when *The Dark Knight Returns* was published, fan culture in general and the superhero in particular ascended to the height of cultural relevance. This transition and its importance to understanding the fans themselves are the subject of this study.

Chapter 1

Fanboys, Assemble!:

The Rise of Fan Culture Throughout the Twentieth Century

*“And there came a day, a day unlike any other,
when Earth’s mightiest heroes and heroines found
themselves united against a common threat. On that
day, the Avengers were born – to fight the foes no
single superhero could withstand!... Heed the call...
Avenger, Assemble!”*

Prologue to the *Avengers*, Marvel Comics

In the introduction to their work on 1980s popular culture, Bob Batchelor and Scott F. Stodart contend that 1980s culture was comprised of oppositional forces pitted against each other: conservative and liberal, preppy and punk, and directed to, if not dictated, by American teenagers.¹¹ However, teenagers, like their adult peers, did not share one homogenous culture. Instead, and increasingly throughout the second half of the twentieth century, teenagers and their culture diversified. To speak of a singular teen culture is impossible – from sports to cars and, of course, comic books, teenage hobbies and preoccupations inspired subcultural movements. Comic book fan culture proliferated throughout the late twentieth century and ultimately transitioned from a small subculture to the height of mainstream culture through an amalgamation of forces that worked on and through 1980s teens. By the time of Ronald Reagan’s second presidential campaign, Luke Skywalker and Indiana Jones were household names and people across the country were “phoning home.” Five years later, Tim Burton’s *Batman: the Movie* became one of the highest grossing films of its time.

¹¹ Batchelor, Bob, and Scott F. Stodart, *The 1980s: American Popular Culture Through History*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 27-8

In this chapter, I will retrace the journey of the fanboy from his birth in the early twentieth century through his early years as a denizen of nascent urban teen subculture, through his appearance in Washington, D.C. before a congressional subcommittee, to his arrival at the pinnacle of consumption nearly eighty years later. Along the way, I will identify critical links between cultural production and fanboy identity. Through each leg of this journey, fan culture adapted, responding to the critical political and social problems of the time.

In order to adequately analyze the rise of a fan who spent its days playing and nights dreaming, it will also be necessary to think about the nature of fantasy itself. This chapter will therefore survey some of the critical works on fantasy and play in order to consider how play reinforced the fantasies that populated the pages of comic books and reconfigured the aspirations and anxieties of white middle class male culture. The ultimate goal of this examination is to understand the transformations in fan culture that predated the 1980s.

The Life and Times of the American Fanboy

The story of the genesis of American fan culture is, in part, the story of the Jewish American experience. Many early twentieth century Jewish immigrants established communities in working class neighborhoods in New York City, and middle class neighborhoods in the American mid-west. Jerry Siegel, the creator of Superman, was born on October 17th, 1914 in one such neighborhood. As it is presented in Gerard Jones's *Men of Tomorrow*, Jerry Siegel's life reads like a biographic sketch of a fanboy. From an early age, Siegel had a distinct fascination with two of the most important tributaries of the American comic book: early action cinema and pulp novels. Scared of girls and seemingly

anti-social, Siegel forged connections through a network of young adult male pulp fans. They traded amateur fiction, largely through letter writing and publication in the pulp magazines. And they coined the phrase, “fandom.”¹²

The exemplary fan of the early 1930s looked much like we might expect him to look.

The early fans were overwhelmingly male, mostly middle class, mostly Anglo or Germanic or Jewish, and mostly isolated, whether by geography, personality, or physical disability, until they discovered fandom. Looking at pictures of the early fan clubs, one sees a lot of eyeglasses and few athletic physiques. Like Jerry Siegel, few spoke of their families, but what they said hinted at absent parents, troubled relationships and loneliness.¹³

A later description of Joe Shuster, who co-created Superman, describes him as, “short and scrawny.... badly nearsighted [and] cripplingly timid.” These hallmarks of fandom – eyeglasses, isolation, and general nerdiness – did not change in the fifty years between the 1930s and the 1980s.¹⁴ From Jones’s discussion of these early fans, it is possible to discern how notions of masculinity have been encoded into comic book literature. Bodily descriptions of these early fans stand in contrast to those of their superheroic creation. Superheroes were not small-bodied, near-sighted, or powerless; instead, they were muscular, athletic, and nearly omnipotent.¹⁵ Their power emanated from their bodies –

¹² Jones, Gerard, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Books*, New York: Basic Books, 2004, 24, 26-7, 29, 33

¹³ Jones, 33

¹⁴ As fan culture infiltrated other genres and forms, the quintessential fanboy did not necessarily represent many actual fanboys, who obviously looked differently. By the 1980s, the American fanboy was not necessarily white, straight, middle-class, or male. However, as Bradford Wright explains, mainstream superhero literature predominantly attended to the fantasies of white young men.

¹⁵ Siegel reveals that he fantasized about having super powers to impress girls: “What if I had something special going for me, like jumping over buildings or throwing cars around...? Then

their stature, muscle, speed, etc. They represent the mythic visions of Masculinity, Kimmel describes in *Manhood*.

While Schuster and Siegel were writing for their high school newspaper *The Torch*, Bob Kane was doodling and vandalizing street signs with his gang, the Zorros in New York's East Bronx.¹⁶ Coming of age during the depression, Kane enjoyed spending time with his friends, listening to the radio, going to the movies, and drawing cartoons, but was anxious about money. His father had to work two jobs in order to provide for his family. At the age of 14, motivated by his desire to make money, Kane sold advertisement cartoons to neighborhood shopkeepers. Like Siegel, he drew cartoons for the school paper, *The Clinton News*, though he played second fiddle to Will Eisner (a fanboy legend in his own right).¹⁷ Kane's early life provided him with the inspiration to create one of the most recognizable superheroes of all time – Batman.

As a member of the Zorros, Kane obviously had an affinity for “the Fox” and used him as an inspiration for Batman. His love of the Douglas Fairbanks film *The Mark of Zorro* provided Kane with the idea for both Batman's dual identity and nocturnal habits. Fairbanks was a man, without any special powers. Kane wanted to avoid cribbing Siegel and Shuster's “man of steel” and therefore borrowed from Fairbanks. He created a hero who was only a man, but a man who was “an athlete who (had) the physical prowess of Douglas Fairbanks Sr.”¹⁸ Just as Fairbanks's Zorro needed to protect his true identity, Kane created an alter ego for Batman who would not attract the suspicions of the criminals he

maybe they would notice me.” It is interesting that Superman's alter ego Clark Kent hides his power in the guise of glasses-wearing, clumsy newspaper reporter who is bad with children. Jones, 65

¹⁶ Kane, Bob with Tom Andrae, *Batman & Me: An Autobiography by Bob Kane*, Forrestville, Ca: Eclipse Books, 1989

¹⁷ Will Eisner created the Spirit – a gritty vision of heroism set in a world of urban crime. Eisner's style and the Spirit's brand of heroism presaged Miller's darkness. See Wright, Bradford, *Comic Book Nation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, pg 19 and Pustz, 39

¹⁸ Kane, 36-8

captured. Instead of a foppish count, Kane made Bruce Wayne the wealthy son of Thomas and Martha Wayne, the veritable king and queen of Gotham City and gave Bruce Wayne the protections of unimaginable wealth and social status.

Douglas Fairbanks was not the only source of inspiration for Batman. Kane's relationship to his father and to money also influenced the creation of Bruce Wayne and Batman. Kane says that his father encouraged his artistic pursuits, purchasing a secondhand violin and drafting table despite the family's insufficient income. He also claims that his father was supportive of his desires to draw comic strips because of the potential to make a lot of money. But it was the mutually productive yet oppositional relationship between Kane's love for his father and hatred of poverty that provided him with the true background for Batman. Bruce Wayne became Batman to rid Gotham City of crime after witnessing his parents' murders. Bob Kane became a cartoonist to escape his father's fate: unemployment and passionless living. Kane loved art and drawing and had an intense aversion to poverty. He emulated his wealthy uncle Lou, and retrospectively credits a chance meeting with Babe Ruth for fueling his quest for success. Supposedly, the Babe told young Bob: "Remember one thing: always take a big swing at the plate, 'cause you'll never connect with a home run if you don't!" Kane remarked:

Looking back on my meeting with the Babe I didn't realize then how profound a philosophy of life he had expounded in his simple, earthy manner. It would be advice I would follow the rest of my life.¹⁹

This anecdote may be true or it may stand only to serve Kane's deterministic reminiscence. Whichever the case, what is clear from Kane's recollections and Gerard Jones's work on Jerry Siegel is that both they and early fans engaged in constructing a

¹⁹ Kane, 11-12, 103-4. Batman's origin story was not introduced into the Batman continuity until Detective Comics #33. Batman assumed the mantle and cloak in order to "strike terror into [his criminal adversaries] hearts."

mythology steeped in immigrant ideals and Depression era fears and anxieties. They breathed life into American gods and monsters that functioned symbolically in response to the issues that plagued them. It was in these days of the pre-war period – especially the power struggles between rival gangs during the Great Depression - that the American fan was born. While Siegel and Shuster's Superman reflects the values of the American heartland, Batman strikes at the deep-seated fears of urban life

According to Kane, Batman underwent numerous of changes within the first five years of his publication. In 1940, in *Batman #1*, Batman met his arch-nemesis, the Joker, with whom he would still be fighting seventy years later. Kane, and co-writer Jerry Robinson introduced the Joker, a pallid, green-haired sociopath who delighted in killing innocent people to foil Batman's stark, upright moral code. The Joker was the first of the rogue's gallery of villains with whom Batman would fight in his quest to rid Gotham City of crime. Between 1940 and 1943, Kane, Finger and Robinson introduced Harvey "Two Face" Dent, Catwoman, Clayface and the Penguin. Each was added to appeal to a different part of the fanboy demographic. Catwoman "[gave] the strip sex appeal." Two Face and Clayface invoked the grotesque and allowed Kane and company to reinforce the dark nature of *Batman*. Batman has been defined by his nemeses and the ways in which they serve as foils for each other, each demonstrating Batman's ability to protect the social order from the abnormal forces that threatened it by countering them.²⁰

The Batman fantasy could only hold so long as the threat of devastating violence remained a fantasy. The global aggressions of the late 1930s and 1940s required a reworked fantasy in order to remain tenable.²¹ World War II (WWII) provided comic book

²⁰ Kane, 105-112

²¹ According to the fan "zine", "The Nostalgia Zone" reprints of newspaper funnies dominated comics sales, totaling a meager one million issues sold per year between the top three titles. Five

writers with an even more concrete example of villainy and helped broadcast some of the most basic tenets of superheroism – strict adherence to a moral imperative, liberation and protection of the weak, and unyielding faith in the inevitability of the failure of criminality – to sectors of the population who might not have experienced these values in other cultural forms. The most obvious example of the co-productive relationship between fans and the war was the creation of Captain America.²² In the first issue, Steve Rogers, a young frail boy (perhaps a nod to early fan readers), enlists in the American army, but is deemed unfit for service. Rogers displays exceptional “fervor” and is offered a place in a secret program. He is injected with the super-soldier serum and becomes Captain America, the defender of American liberty imperiled by the evil Nazi Red Skull. In its introductory year, *Captain America Comics* sold nearly one million issues.²³ But *Captain America* was not alone in this sales boom. DC comics’ *Superman* and *Captain Marvel* also experienced record sales. Jones reports that midway through the war, almost one third of printed material mailed to military personnel was comic books.

Much like young Steve Rogers, Bob Kane was deemed unfit for service in World War II. A fight with members of a childhood gang had left him with limited use of his right arm. The army gave him a 4-F classification that left him ineligible for duty. Unlike Jack Kirby, Stan Lee and Jerry Siegel (who served time in the armed forces), Kane was forced to support the war in other ways. He lent his pen to drawing propaganda posters and Batman

years later, and following the introduction of Batman, Captain Marvel and Captain America, The top three titles totaled over one million issues each. See Carlson, Mark, “Funny Business: A History of the Comics Industry”, *The Nostalgia Zine* (Charts 1 and 2)

²² Captain America was created by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon in 1941 for Marvel Comics, but ran for only ten issues. Creative differences between Kirby and Simon and Martin Goodman, Marvel Comic’s founder put Captain America away until his resurrection under the direction of Stan Lee ten years later. See Saunders, Catherine, et al., *Marvel Chronicles: A Year by Year History*, New York: DK Publishing, 2008, pg. 18

²³ Saunders, 18-19

to a series of short propaganda films.²⁴ Despite comic book super heroes' contributions to the war effort and growing popularity, the fanboy culture they spawned would prove to be a source of extreme anxiety for parents, teachers and lawmakers throughout the United States in the aftermath of World War II.²⁵

Post-war Games: Censorship and Youth in the 1950s

Between the 1930s and the 1960s, comic book readership underwent drastic changes. Between 1937 and 1946, monthly comic book sales increased by almost 200%. Over the next fifteen years, those sales decreased from nine hundred thirty thousand to roughly five hundred fifty thousand comic books sold per month (See Chart 1). Overall yearly figures for DC comics and Marvel comics also indicate a period of high circulation during WWII and significant decrease in sales (see Chart 2). Deflated sales and circulation reflects the change in regard for comics and the comic book industry. The post-war period was remarkably hostile to comics; adult critics expressed their outrage at the subject matter printed in comic books. They viewed comics as a main source of violence and promiscuity in the culture, citing comics as a principal cause of juvenile delinquency. Young males were often prone to suspicions of delinquency because they behaved in ways that society deemed non-masculine – in short, young males who did not contribute to society in measurable ways by working, succeeding in school, fighting the Nazi's, etc., were not behaving as men should. Consequently, adults scrutinized male teen culture in order to control and recondition their behavior.²⁶ The ensuing section reveals the

²⁴ Kane, 11

²⁶ Gilbert claims that the fear of delinquency was rooted in three things: "unmeasurable" but likely increase in juvenile crime, a "shift in the behavior of law enforcement agencies," and changes in "the behavior of youth that were susceptible to interpretation as criminal." In each case, the fear that manifest was rooted in the fear of infiltration of the middle class by those outside its bounds. That

condemnations of teen behavior and the impact those condemnations had on masculinity. And while Bradford Wright is correct in arguing that “adults have attributed undesirable changes in youth behavior to some aspect of popular culture,” the 1950s manifestation of this phenomenon was rooted in the complex relationship between conceptions of masculinity, the new Cold War and the desire to protect and preserve America in the face of a smart and strong Soviet Union.

The effort to police culture was not merely a reaction to teen’s new-found liberation. At stake for many parents was the America they built. Beth Bailey framed juvenile delinquency as a battle a different mythology – the myth of the American dream. According to Bailey, the pre-War dream was a dream of competition, of “risk,” and the rewards of perseverance, tempered, like the American superhero and his creators, by the struggles of world war and global depression.

The new-style post-war American dream seemed to look to the private as the sphere of fulfillment, of self-definition and self-realization. Struggle was not desired, but stasis. The dream was of a private life - a family, secure, stable, and comfortable - that compensated for one's public (work) life... Many contemporary observers feared that the desire for security was overwhelming the 'traditional' American ethic. In the dangerous post-war world, they asserted, the rejection of the public, of work and of risk would soon destroy America's prosperity and security.²⁷

By the end of World War II, Americans were tired. They yearned for their promised, but ever ephemeral “domestic tranquility.”

Focus on the home and its vulnerability to corruption characterized the mood of American mood in the postwar period and was evident in various culture productions. In

young adult behavior “symbolized” a “social disintegration,” or the deterioration of those bounds indicates that to Gilbert juvenile delinquency was really an attempt at policing the middle class and restricting those who could identify as such. Rebellion was not merely a unilateral attack by children on their parents, but rather a multilateral destabilization of the foundations of white, middle-class America. Gilbert, 71, 76-7

²⁷ Bailey, Beth, “Rebels Without a Cause?”, *History Today*; Feb 90, Vol. 40 Issue 2

particular, this theme was prevalent if not dominant in the science fiction of the period. The popular film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (*Invasion*) ruminated on the many fears associated with the vulnerability of the domestic sphere. In *Invasion*, Santa Mira, California is taken over by alien pods. They infiltrate individual homes and assume the shape of the people living there. The audience for *Invasion*, much like the spate of other science fiction and “horror” films of the 1950s, was most likely young – adolescent to young/early adult – and probably predominantly white, the same demographic for comic book readers. Moreover, the narrative of *Invasion* was simple, and it was aimed not at children, but at parents. The inhabitants of Santa Mira, stood idly by while subversive aliens invaded their homes.²⁸ To many outraged adults, comics were analogous to the pods. They entered the home undetected by parents, and corrupted young boys, making them violent and antisocial.

These critics ranged across the social, intellectual and political spectrum. Dr. Fredric Wertham, a liberal psychiatrist opposed to segregation and champion of the underprivileged to affordable mental health, made for an unlikely standard-bearer for the anti-comic crusade. Wertham thought that comics corrupted children exactly as the pods did in *Invasion*. Wertham alleged that certain criminal acts committed by children were directly caused by comic books, a conclusion he came to as the result of interviews he

²⁸ Wright, 87; Siegel, Don (dir), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, 1956; In her article on *Invasion*, Katrina Mann argues that the film presents the politics of difference as the source of anxiety in the post-war period. She claims that what is specifically at stake is not life, but patriarchal power. The political and cultural similarities between the 1950s and 1980s notwithstanding, this claim is of particular relevance here because K. Mann exposes the brittle columns that supported the columns as early as the 1950s, and explores the ways in which certain social justice movements of the 1940s defaulted those columns in order that their collapse would generate anxiety in the 1950s. Mann, Katrina, "You're Next!": Postwar Hegemony Besieged in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*", Cinema Journal

conducted with parents of juvenile offenders and the offenders themselves.²⁹ The Daughters of the American Revolution and the Catholic National Organization for Decent Literature, both of who had more conservative political agendas, also sought to limit the content printed in comic books. Comic book distributors tried to appease the rabid censors by creating the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers and instituting a code much like the Motion Picture Production Code. The self-regulation left critics skeptical and the tenuous partnership between the publishers faltered fairly quickly. Additionally the cost of regulation made ACMP oversight too expensive for practical use.³⁰

While these groups and others fought battles over the legal contours of violent and sexually explicit comics, legislators and jurists contended with the legal rights of publishers and distributors. A 1941 New York State law made it a punishable offense, “to publish or distribute publications ‘principally made up of criminal deeds or pictures or stories of deeds of bloodshed, lust or crime,’” overstepping both the First and Fourteenth Amendments.³¹ In 1946, the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments in *Winters v. New York*, which sought to overturn the conviction of a man indicted for distributing comic books. The Court held in a 6-3 decision that the statute was vague and therefore untenable; “Where a statute is so vague as to make criminal an innocent act, a conviction under it cannot be sustained.”³² However, the Court did not conclusively view statutes limiting speech as violating the publisher or distributor’s rights to speech, association or due process as promised by the First and Fourteenth Amendments. In his dissent, Justice

²⁹The instances in which Wertham attacks comics in *Seduction of the Innocent* are too numerous to cite individually, however, certain highlights include Chapters entitled, “The Wrong Twist: the Effects of Comic Books on the Child” and “I Want to be a Sex Maniac!: Comic Books and the Psychosexual Development of Children”, in which he suggests that Batman and Robin share a pederastic relationship, 188-9

³⁰ For more, see Wright, Chapter 4, “Youth Crisis”, 84-108

³¹ *Winters v. New York*, 333 U.S. 507 (1948)

³² *Winters*, 333 U.S. at 520 (1948).

Frankfurter claimed that the New York Court of Appeals and the majority of State Legislatures, whose laws condemning the publication and sale of material directed at inciting violence became void pursuant to the *Winters* decision, were best equipped to diagnose and treat the symptoms of rampant criminality. He claimed that specificities of the New York statute and similar statutes in other states were simply and appropriately directed at works whose agenda was singly motivated to the incitation of violence (one of few limitations on the First Amendment in the 1940s).³³

Regardless of the reservations Frankfurter had for the Court's findings, *Winters* provided comic book publishers with a legal shield. But *Winters* also fueled the effort to reinstate limitations on comics. In 1949 a New York State Senator proposed that the State Department of Education oversee and regulate the distribution of comics. The bill was overwhelmingly popular, passing easily in both houses of the state legislature. Surprisingly, Governor Dewey vetoed the bill on the grounds that it violated precedent set by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Winters v. New York*. The legislative measures proposed in New York found footholds in other parts of the country, California and Massachusetts.³⁴

Though the comic book industry was able to weather the storm of criticism in the 1940s, the storm grew in magnitude in the 1950s. Again, children's vulnerabilities to corruption and "delinquency" were central to the issue. From James Dean and his persona as a "rebel" to the warring gangs of the Broadway musical *West Side Story* and Holden Caulfield's distrust and anger at the phony adults in his life, 1950s American culture produced a number of young, "troubled" boys and girls angered at invasive adults. These

³³ *Winters*, 333 U.S. at 527-28 (1948) (Frankfurter, J., dissenting).

³⁴ Wright, 103-8 It is important to note that through all of the posturing over the legal rights of comic book producers to produce comics and the power of parents to restrict rights, the rights of readers to read and purchase comics was not raised as an issue.

teens were part of a new generation, too young to participate in the war, too old to experience the thrill of American triumph after years of struggle. The liminal position of American teens created what James Gilbert called, “a breakdown in generational communication.” Though an age gap already existed between teenagers and adult parents, teachers, clerics, etc., television, film and comic books widened that gap.³⁵

As violence and sexuality grew more blatant in comics (like *Tales From the Crypt*) parental concern increased. Of the many voices raised in protest, Dr. Wertham’s was again the loudest. In 1953, he published his research in his book, *The Seduction of the Innocent*, in which Wertham argued that there was a direct correlation between the quantity of violent comic books in general circulation and real violent crime committed by children. Through a series of psychotherapeutic interviews of mostly poor, juvenile offenders, the nature of play, especially violent play, was often inaccurately viewed by the public as harmless. Rather than viewing play as a safe and constructive way for children to vent their frustration and animus, Wertham saw it as practice and preparation for moments of real violent crime.³⁶

Dr. Wertham’s work, though vitally important to the crusade against comics, had major methodological and ethical flaws. Wertham did not clearly outline the procedures of his scientific inquiry, did not report on data culled from that inquiry and did not employ a control group to test whether or not violence was conditional only in those children who read violent comics, if the culture in general was influential or if violence in children was

³⁵ Gilbert, 3-6 Gilbert further explained that the fulminations in the 1950s were not wholly new, but that their newness stemmed from the democratizing forces of mass culture. He called juvenile delinquency an “episodic notion,” by which he means that it often recurs as a cultural condition but that each new manifestation creates new meanings. Gilbert attributed the 1950s manifestation of the juvenile delinquency problem as consequence of social interactions between middle-class children and low-class cultural values. Parents resisted these interactions, and, viewing mass culture as the conduit for those interactions, targeted it for blame.

³⁶ Wertham, Joseph, M.D., *Seduction of the Innocent*, Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1953, 67.

indicative of some other psychological stimulus. Wertham's generalized theories about play (i.e. that comics were "anti-educational" because they "interfere" with proper education as it occurs "in school, [...] from entertainment and in social life with adults and other children") were simply too general.³⁷ Though he accurately characterized play as a means through which children learn about society, he over-emphasized the tendency to enact fantasies children and adults used play to fulfill.³⁸ But most importantly, Wertham avoided the other forces of socialization and acculturation he claimed were part of the educational process, like means and ability.

Of course, the *Winters* decision established a concrete precedent, precluding other state legislatures and the federal government from truncating or censoring the content of comics or their distribution. But the guise of children's welfare was powerful enough for parents and other groups to effectuate their own censorial efforts. In 1954, Congress called a hearing on juvenile delinquency in order to probe the "Possible detrimental influence certain types of crime and horror comic books have upon their children."³⁹ From the outset, the committee made certain considerations for specific kinds of comic books; they targeted comics that featured depictions of crime and horror. Experts testified that comic books were detrimental to the psychological or developmental health of children that they promoted antisocial behavior, and that antisociality led to delinquency and crime. The committee sorted comics into one of four categories: no objection, some objection, objectionable and very objectionable. Parent groups created their own rubrics for countering the "threat" of comic books. The Committee of Evaluation of Comics (based in Ohio, the birthplace of Superman) found that 62% of comics, including Batman and

³⁷ Wertham, 89

³⁹ "Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)", hearing. US Senate Subcommittee on the Committee of the Judiciary, 21 April 1954

Superman, contained material that was in part or whole objectionable. A similar publication, scoring 555 comic books on a scale from A to D, where A represented material that was not objectionable and D represented material that was very objectionable, rated Batman and Captain America at C or below.⁴⁰

In the summary report published in March of 1955, Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee contended that the purpose of the congressional hearings was not censorship or obstruction of the comic book industry's First Amendment rights. Instead, the committee was responding to an overwhelming call for information:

It was the consensus that the need existed for a thorough, objective investigation to determine whether, as has been alleged, certain types of mass communication media are to be reckoned with as contributing to the country's alarming rise in juvenile delinquency. These include: "crime and horror" comic books and other types of printed matter; the radio, television, and motion pictures.

In its investigations of mass media, as in its investigation of other phases of the total problem, the subcommittee has not been searching for "one cause." Delinquency is the product of many related causal factors. But it can scarcely be questioned that the impact of these media does constitute a significant factor in the total problem.⁴¹

The report continues to describe, in detail, the harmful influence comics had on children, how that influence led to increased instances of juvenile delinquency and ultimately who was responsible for stymieing the threat of juvenile delinquency induced by reading comics. The quote above indicates the government desired *de facto* censorship on the part of parents and community organizations, to avoid certain dangers of overt censorship that might have been construed as an affront to personal liberty.

⁴⁰ For more on the comic book industry's response to the subcommittee hearings, see Wright, Chapter 8

⁴¹ Kefauver, Este, "Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency: A Part of the Investigation of Juvenile Delinquency in the United States": Report to US Congress, 14 March 1955

Rather than redact certain material from publication, the government presented an index of forbidden books, which was both published in the transcripts of the hearing and broadcast during its televised portions. Kefauver also issued the following charge to the comic book industry:

In short, neither the comic-book industry nor any other sector of the media of mass communications can absolve itself from responsibility for the effects of its product. Attempts to shift all responsibility to parents are unjustified. Claims of the absolute right of an industry to produce what it pleases unless it is proven "beyond a reasonable doubt" that such a product is damaging to children, are unjustified. Parents have a right to expect that the producers of materials that may influence their children's thinking will exercise a high degree of caution. They have a right to expect the highest degree of care. And the American people have a right to demand that this degree of care be exercised at all times, in all ways, and with respect to all mass media...

It is the opinion of the subcommittee that because of his key position in the industry, a major responsibility falls upon the national distributor for the content of the printed matter he distributes.

By placing the burden of regulation on the distributor, Congress absolved itself of the responsibility to regulate and simultaneously illuminated the boundaries that existed between what might be called "mainstream" American culture and fan subculture.

The challenges to publication and distribution did not end with the Kefauver hearings and industry regulations. By the mid-1950s, New York State ratified new legislation limiting the content of certain comics. Bolstered by self-imposed industry standards and free from constitutional challenge, Governor W. Averell Harriman ratified the Fitzpatrick Act. Despite saber rattling from comic's publishers and civil liberties groups, the Supreme Court did not entertain the challenges to the law. Regardless, the combined

efforts of parents, legislatures and the CMAA all-but removed objectionable content from the pages of comics.⁴²

The legal challenges the comic book industry faced in the 1940s and 1950s impacted comic readers in a number of ways. First, anti-comics legislation and industry standards limited the kinds of material that could appear in comics. According to industry insiders, comic writers and artists erred on the side of caution, writing and drawing books that they knew would pass the Comics Code's intrusive censorship.⁴³ One year after the imposition of the Comics Code, DC Comics sales plunged nearly 75%.⁴⁴ Second, legislative action primarily targeted distribution as a means of policing comic book content. It therefore became more difficult to procure books that grated against imposed industry standards. So while this material continued to exist in the culture, it was much more difficult to get. Above all, action against comics successfully decreased the amount of comics in the culture and therefore successfully suppressed comic book culture.

The Silver Age of Fandom

The combined efforts of Wertham, concerned parents and state legislators led to a staggering depression in comic book sales.⁴⁵ Industry standards and state censorship, which forced publishers to redact objectionable content, resituated marketing strategies in the 1960s. Some publishers chose to focus on comics designed for young children. These comics were ill equipped for teens' attitudes in the late 50s and early 60s. Television, Rock n' Roll and film all filled the void left when comic book material shifted to suit

⁴² Amper, Richard, "Assembly Votes Comic Book Curb" New York Times, 23 March 1955, pg 33

⁴³ The Comics Code was an industry-established that censored out material that violated "good taste." It enumerated what material might violate this taste. See *Comics Magazine Association of America. Facts about Code-Approved Comics Magazines*. New York: the Association, 1959

⁴⁴ Carter, Mac (dir), *Secret Origin, The Story of DC Comics*, Warner Home Video, 2009. This statistic is a bellweather for the general trend in comic books sales in the post war era. See Chart 1

⁴⁵ See Charts 1 and 2

younger readers and pass the Comics Code.⁴⁶ By 1962, the number of comics published annually dropped more than 50 percent from ten years earlier.⁴⁷ But the taboos of crime and sexuality allowed certain writers to rethink the boundaries of tenable content. Remembering the popularity of early comics figures like Batman, Wonder Woman and Captain America, DC and Marvel comics both increased their focus on superhero titles. For DC, this meant retooling many of the superheroes that existed in their universe. For Marvel, it meant the introduction of new superheroes. Comics of the 1960s and 1970s were as important to comic's readership and fan culture as they were to the financial futures of DC and Marvel. With vested interest in reestablishing their economic presence, both DC and Marvel resituated superheroes at the center of comic book culture. Dubbed the Silver Age of Comics by comic book historians, the comic book literature produced in this period significantly influenced later productions in the genre.⁴⁸

Between 1956 and 1960, DC editor Julius Schwartz reworked many of the company's heroes from old and outdated modes into newer, shinier models befitting 1960s readers. Green Lantern, the Flash, Hawkman and the Atom were all given new origin stories. In 1960, they appeared alongside Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman as members of the Justice League of America (JLA). Perhaps as a response to the overwhelming criticism and censorship of the 40s and 50s, DC's heroes were aligned, "squarely on the side of established authority, with which it naturally equated the best interests of American citizens."⁴⁹ Characteristically, this alignment was with white, middle

⁴⁶ Wright,

⁴⁷ Wright, 182 (see also Chart 2).

⁴⁸ Saunders, 144

⁴⁹ Wright, 184

class and male citizens, a not-so-subtle hint at the fanboy demographic.⁵⁰ African American characters were rare and although female characters appeared, they were often offered as less powerful, less serious alternatives for female readers.⁵¹ In short, DC's resurgent superheroes were well suited for the Cold War adult consciousness of the early 1960s, although these heroes seemed to resolve the issues parents had with comics of earlier periods they were not necessarily well suited to the changing cultural dimensions of young American life in the early 1960s.⁵²

Marvel Comics had an altogether different approach to crossing the gap between acceptable publications and young adult audiences. Under the editorial direction of Stan Lee and the able pens of Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, Marvel comics reimagined both the superhero genre and many of its devices. First, rather than package American triumphal spirit in the form of benevolent superheroes who recapitulated hackneyed aphorisms, Kirby and Ditko presented heroes who were the victims of the nuclear age: their superpowers were the results of scientific failures and miscalculations and their identities were based in the complex realities of everyday life in the 1960s. Second, superheroism was presented as both a gift and a curse (the *Spider-man* quote, "with great power comes great responsibility" is a perfect explanation of this phenomenon).⁵³ Third, conflict between

⁵⁰ Though DC and Marvel have tried to seek broader reading audiences by including non-white heroes, publications featuring these heroes remain few. Notably, DC and Marvel have introduced non-white superheroes into their pantheons including Luke Cage, John Stewart (a Green Lantern), and recently the Ultimate Spiderman, Miles Morales, who is half-Latino half African-American. See Flock, Elizabeth, "Peter Parker Replacement with Biracial Spiderman Sparks Outcry from Glenn Beck, Others," *Washington Post Online*, 3 August 2011

⁵¹ Wright, 185

⁵² The relationship between comics and Cold War consciousness was complicated. As many writers used comics as sounding boards for resistance as used it to help marshal American consensus. It is difficult to assess how much animosity towards comics was generated from violent and sexual content and how much grew out of political confrontations between the left and the right. For more, see Wright, Chapter 5, 109-153

⁵³ Lee, Stan, *Amazing Fantasy #15* (August 1962), the first appearance of Spider-man

humanity and superheroism was often the source of drama; the heroes' alter egos were as important to the narrative structure of the comics as their heroic acts.

Between 1961 and 1963, Marvel introduced Spider-man, the Hulk, Thor, Iron Man and the Fantastic Four into the superhero canon. Alongside Captain America, Namor the Submariner and later additions the X-Men, these heroes formed the foundations of the Marvel Universe. As Spider-man, Iron Man and the Fantastic Four, they fought against Dr. Doom, the Tinkerer, and the Green Goblin. As Peter Parker, Tony Stark, Reed Richards, Susan and Jonny Storm and Benjamin Grimm, they faced commonplace troubles: Peter Parker was a student who had to balance his school work with fighting the forces of evil, Reed Richards and Susan Storm were on-again-off-again, and Tony Stark was an alcoholic who lived in his father's shadow.⁵⁴

The simultaneous development of the universe system compounded the power of the superhero by strengthening the ties one superhero had to another. Both the economic and narrative benefits of having overlapping, intermingling storylines were two-fold. For one, writers could stage major crossover events, with complex narrative tie-ins and carry-overs. A reader could not simply pick up a copy of Spider-man or Batman and know what was happening; readers had to become fans, investing considerable time and money in reading various titles across the brands.⁵⁵ Additionally, the transition from isolated titles to universes promoted the mythos and deepened the roots superheroes had in the culture. The development and implementation of the universe system was therefore a crucial moment in the history of fan culture as it increased familiarity with the material and increased circulation of comics throughout the culture.

⁵⁴ Saunders, 80-94

⁵⁵ Wright, 218

Youth culture of the 1960s was as much about resisting norms as it was about conformity. Superhero comics offered figures whose very existences were made more difficult by the challenges of wielding their superpowers and fitting in.⁵⁶ Spider-man is a clear example and this fact more than any other might explain his popularity. Spider-man was incredibly powerful, possessing such abilities as web-slinging and wall crawling, yet Peter Parker was awkward with girls, got beat up by jock bullies and had a curfew. Third, Marvel Comics spoke about timely issues in language that resonated with youngsters and adults alike. As the decades progressed, issues grew more complex; comic books developed the ability to distill out the major component parts and present them to young readers in digestible portions. In a 2002 editorial in the *New York Times*, Stan Lee called Spider-man “realistic fantasy.”⁵⁷ Children who watched television and were aware of life’s complications would not be appeased by 1940s dander. Parents and teachers could not obfuscate the realities of the world at large when kids could turn on Walter Cronkite at six o’clock. Comic writers and publishers used their readers’ connectedness to their advantage.

The innovations Lee, Kirby and Ditko made to the superhero genre resonated with teen readers in the early 1960s. Money troubles, girl problems, substance abuse and the all-too-real politics of the Vietnam War spoke to 1960s teens in ways that the dated rectitude of the Justice League could not. While Batman and the other members of the DC universe offered a viable entrée into the superhero mythos for young comic book readers, their Marvel alternatives provided teen and young adult readers with content that was specifically written to keep them reading later in life. Coupled with the universe system

⁵⁶ Wright, 219

⁵⁷ Lee also commented that Spider-man’s costume allowed the reader to see him or herself as the man behind the mask regardless of race or creed. Lee, Stan, “That’s My Spidey,” *New York Times*, 3 May 2002

and increasingly complex narratives, readers were more likely to read past childhood than ever before.⁵⁸

Despite the advancements to the genre, many Americans experienced superheroes on the small screen. Sales continued to languish for DC Comics and though Marvel Comics' introduction of Silver Age heroes improved Marvel's market share, TV presentations of Batman and Wonder Woman, DC properties, were also widely popular with audiences. The 1966 *Batman* television series was, if anything, the antithesis of the realistic fantasies populating Marvel's pages. Parceling pop art, camp and mod styles into one strange television show, *Batman* was a recapitulation of the 1940s Batman formula: A criminal with a gimmick, like telling jokes or leaving clues in the form of riddles, threatened Gotham's wealthy elite. Wealthy Bruce Wayne and his ward Dick Grayson would receive a call on their blinking red "Batphone," slide down the telephone pole hidden in their bookshelves and land in the Batcave fully changed and ready to "fight." The show was animated with explosive, onomatopoetic bubbles like the comic; Batman, Robin and their enemies quipped and punned (Robin was particularly famous for cleverly joining "holy" with some word or phrase with horrific effects like "Holy Bill of Rights" or "Holy priceless collection of Etruscan snoods!"), and the threat of real, palpable danger was almost non-existent. According to Wright, the show's slapstick and camp humor eroded some of the ground Marvel had gained through its use of realism. While this may

⁵⁸ Marvel also broke boundaries on racial fronts as well. In 1966, Marvel introduced the first black superhero, the Black Panther. They also began to introduce black faces into street scenes, signaling that they were aware that the whitewashed presentation of "America" depicted in comics since their inception was culturally irrelevant in the age of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Wright, 219 and Marvel Chronicles, 117. Difference was also an intense focus of the X-Men title, which would become an allegory for gay rights battles in the 1970s.

have been true as far as average, everyday viewing audiences were concerned, it did not adequately explain changes in readership within the community.⁵⁹

Change was the defining feature of fan culture in the 1960s and 70s. Marvel and DC publications featured stories that responded to the real world social change by featuring relevant dramas in the pages of their comic books. Comic book writers wrote material that responded to the real-world issues of the day – the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, etc. Marvel Comics’ response to the Vietnam War exemplifies this trend.⁶⁰ Comic book superheroes were, more often than not, social “liberals”; reformers who nonetheless rejected the tactics of the more radical left. As disdainful as they were of militants, superheroes were intolerant of conservative reactionaries. As outsiders, they recognized and sympathized with the desire for inclusion.⁶¹ Though many American youths loathed militarism, the castigation of the comic book community of radicalism left some readers feeling betrayed. Consumption faltered slightly in this period.⁶²

Fan-tastic Voyages

By 1970, the comic book had undergone numerous changes to its structure and form. But changes to television and film technology gave visual media an edge in the

⁵⁹ Wright, 225

⁶⁰ A 1968 Spider-Man comic features Peter Parker trapped at Empire State University during a student takeover. Parker is torn between supporting his fellow students and combating lawlessness. Wright, 234

⁶¹ Wright, 235-8. Wright also notes that while readers responded to white characters whose superpowers made them different from “normal” Americans, they were reluctant to buy into minority heroes. Most of the titles featuring non-white heroes folded within a few years of initial publication. Stories about women were also nominally present but lacked both/either quality and/or readership. In *Secret Origin*, key writers of this time explain their desire to work against the system that restricted creativity. Introducing minority characters and controversial subject matter that spoke to a younger, more troubled audience suited this agenda, but was unpopular with parents. These two forces, lack of interest and pressure (both self-imposed and external) could explain the delay in telling stories about non-white heroes.

⁶² See Chart 1

production of programming directed to fans. These developments coincided with diminished creativity in the comic book world, and led to a decrease in readership that lasted until the 1980s. Additionally, cross-marketing approaches, which used popular film and television shows to sell other merchandise, like books, apparel and lunch boxes, compounded profits generated from individual copyrights. . These strategies drew on practices producers had used since the 1950s but used them to bolster serial film releases and episodic television shows, increasing market shares and ratings tremendously. Finally, the development of fantasy gaming in both its tabletop and video varieties, further altered the fantasy experience and contributed to the mutations of fan culture in the 1970s.

The result of these changes, then, was a new terrain of interconnected narratives and pipelines through which fans could access those narratives. Rather than merely (and passively) read about these fantasies, fans could view them in realistic presentations and then reenact them on their own. Despite their potentially detrimental effect on comic book readership, fantasy gaming, video games, blockbuster cinema, and science fiction television worked in tandem with comic book literature to produce this new terrain. This section will detail some of those changes and explore the ways the new cultural forms created space for new kinds of fans.

If comic books provided readers with the opportunity to fantasize about having superhuman abilities, then gaming, and the variety of forms it took between the 1970s and 80s offered people the opportunity to enact those fantasies, albeit in a safe way through imagination. The commodification of “gaming” (in both the video and fantasy role-playing varieties) allowed adult “gamers” to perform exercises in fantasy and role-playing well beyond their adolescent years. In many cases, especially in more elaborate tabletop RPGs and video games, fantasies of violence and empowerment were predominantly featured.

Early war games, like H.G. Wells's *Little Wars: A Game for Boys from Twelve years of Age to One Hundred and Fifty and for That more Intelligent Sort of Girl who Likes Boys' Games and Books*, *Risk: The Game of Global Domination* and *Stratego*, played like chess. Each player controlled a side and worked against the other until some goal was achieved: global domination, the death of the king, slaughtering your opponents' armies, etc. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, drawing largely on the work of J.R.R. Tolkien and the Middle Earth Universe he set his many works in, restructured the rules of fantasy gaming. Instead of working against one another, each player would control one hero and the heroes would work collaboratively in "parties." One player, designated the "Dungeon Master" controlled the environment and populated that environment with allies, enemies, obstacles and rewards.⁶³

Players lived the best and worst moments of heroism through the key addition to the game – role-playing. Rather than merely control pieces on a board, players were responsible for enlivening personalities and *interacting* with each other and the dungeon master not only through dice rolls, but through speech, demeanor and dress. The investiture of players in their characters provided the game with the added benefit of extended play.⁶⁴ Rather than set up 32 pieces on an eight by eight grid and calculate the movements of each new opponent, players' characters would carry over from game to game, gaining experience and growing in both complexity and ability over a number of play sessions.

⁶³ Gilsdorf, Ethan, *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks: An Epic Quest for Reality Among Role Players, Online Gamers, and Other Dwellers of Imaginary Realms*, Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2009, pg 70-2

⁶⁴ "Treasures", Wizards of the Coast, http://www.wizards.com/dnd/dndarchives_history.asp

The development of the Dungeons and Dragons gaming system began in the late 1960s.⁶⁵ By 1974, a marketable system had been developed. The first run of one thousand copies sold out within a year and in 1976 Tactical Studies Rules, the creator of D&D, dissolved and reformed as TSR, Inc. That same year, the fantasy gaming world received its first fantasy gaming magazine, *The Dragon* and its first major gaming convention, *GenCon*. Though popular in small gaming communities, and growing in popularity in its early days, D&D (as it is called both colloquially and by industry insiders), like comics before, was accused by outsiders of inducing violence and leading children away from Christianity.⁶⁶ Parental and clerical animus towards the game did little to stem increasing numbers of players; if anything, it granted fantasy gaming a certain amount of anti-establishment credibility.

To this point, chronologically speaking, comic book enthusiasts comprised the majority of the fan community. And comics, through their various interactions with the parents and the law, oscillated between sub and mainstream cultures. But one of the most important developments in the history of fan culture came out of a completely different fan community.⁶⁷ Drawing inspiration from science fiction and western radio dramas, filmmakers in the 1970s transformed the action-adventure cinema into something that comic book fans would grow to love. Following the release of such blockbuster films as *Jaws* (1976), *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977) and *Superman* (1978), the fan community

⁶⁵ "Treasures", Wizards of the Coast, http://www.wizards.com/dnd/dndarchives_history.asp

⁶⁶ A 1989 *Chick* publications article outlines by William Schnoebelen is extreme example of the invective lobbed at fantasy gaming and gamers. Schnoebelen claimed that, as a former practitioner of Satanism and "witchcraft," he had consulted for the game designers and could attest to the realistic nature of the spells and rituals in the game. Citing other critics, Schnoebelen concluded, "there is no doubt that Dungeons and Dragons and its imitators are right out of the pit of hell. No Christian or sane, decent individual of whatever faith really should have anything to do with them." Schnoebelen, William, "Straight Talk on Dungeons and Dragons",

⁶⁷ In Steven Spielberg's *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* (1982), there is a scene in which the main characters play a game of Dungeons and Dragons. Though apocryphal, there have been numerous Internet rumors about the godfather's of blockbuster cinema's gaming habits.

expanded to include devotees of these films.⁶⁸ Narrative similarities between comics, blockbuster films and games led to the gravitation of members of these communities towards each other. In the late 1970s, they formed a loosely connected subculture. The introduction of comic book stores in the 1980s reinforced the connections that existed between the members of each community by concentrating the sale of merchandise targeted to each in a singular place. The fusion of these three groups into a community of fans launched the fanboy into the cultural mainstream and led to the idea of the fanboy we have today.

Released in the early summer of 1976, *Jaws* was one of the first summer blockbusters. In its first weekend, *Jaws* made \$7,061,573. In the summer months of 1976, it quickly eclipsed *The Godfather* and *The Exorcist* to become the highest grossing film of all time. Not only was the film a cultural phenomenon, it inspired intense conversation about film revenue. Studios quickly realized that they could generate a majority of their annual revenue between May and September allowing them to finance other projects. While *Jaws* provided the film community with a striking entrée in to the commercial potential of the summer market, its narrative also spoke to many of the same people who sought heroes in the pages of comic books and on the imaginary battlefields of their role-playing games. At its heart, *Jaws* is the story of one man's fight against an antisocial force in order to save his community. Martin Brody, the new chief of police in Amity, must protect the summer vacation spot from a predatory great white shark. He is joined by Quint, a salty game fisher who knows how to kill the shark and Matt Hooper, a scientist

⁶⁸ Most film historians agree that Stephen Spielberg's *Jaws* was the first summer blockbuster film. As Tom Shone explains in *Blockbuster*, Universal Studios executive Lew Wasserman wanted *Jaws* to "play all summer long." This idea of a film playing from May to September has, in recent years, gone by the wayside, instead, today's Summer blockbusters need to make their millions in the first few weeks, before the next blockbuster comes along. Shone, Tom, *Blockbuster: How the Jaws and Jedi Generation Turned Hollywood Into a Boomtown*, London: Scribner Press, 2004

tracking the shark. Shone calls *Jaws*, “an exercise in dramatic downsizing, attuned to the scuffy, low-slung heroism of ordinary men, and engaging in pitched battle with just a single shark, which kills only four people in the entire movie – and not at a single stroke... but in four separate courses...,”⁶⁹ comparing it to contemporary visions of summer blockbusters which feature “singular superheroes” vying for the salvation of mankind. But Shone’s vision of *Jaws* is closer in timbre to the superheroes of the 1960s than he would have us believe. Brody, Quint and Hooper comprise a kind of league of extraordinary fishermen, each with his own unique ability to help track the monster shark.

More than anything else, *Jaws* created a new genre; a set of stylistic and conventional elements that would come to be repeated in the ensuing years. In 1977, George Lucas’s *Star Wars, Episode IV: A New Hope* leapt over its financial forebears. But it also introduced America to the universe of advanced special effects. Lucas screened the film for his friends and producers two months before its release to a general viewing audience. By and large, they hated it. Without special effects, the film had little appeal. The producers could not believe that America would accept the confusing pastiche Lucas cut together in *Star Wars*.⁷⁰ What Lucas, and Spielberg before him understood and capitalized on was the growing desire for realistic fantasy that transcended the normal suspension of disbelief necessary for most spectacles. If realism relied on a logical sensory experience, then the fantastic elements of the narratives had to work on the senses in realistic ways. Special effects provided filmmakers with the tools to make the fantasy reality. Lucas and his effects team built stunning models of intergalactic battle cruisers, forest moons and death stars. They linked these miniatures to superior sound mixing and editing. The multisensory experience provided moviegoers with an altogether new

⁶⁹ Shone, 32

⁷⁰ Shone, 50

experience. Though science fiction films were common in the 1950s and 1960s, Lucas presentation revolutionized the genre. He liberated the science fiction from the pages of the fiction and set the stage for the superhero films that followed. No longer bound to reading about or imagining the power of telekinesis or fighting with a special sword, fans could see it on the big screen.

The conventional stylistic similarities between *Star Wars* and comic books made the film instantly digestible for fans. *Star Wars* featured many tropes and formal elements endemic to the comic book. It was a serialized. It featured heroes with supernatural powers engaged in an epic battle between good and evil. It was set “Long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away,” and thus contained space ships, alien races, weapons of light and a myriad of other fantastic forces that drew fans in. But *Star Wars* was also able to reach outside of the boundaries of comic book readers and science fiction lovers to acquire fans from other places.⁷¹ The ersatz reality presented in *Star Wars* allowed for nearly endless interpretations. To some, it was a recapitulation of traditional American triumphalism (the “rebel alliance” representing the Allied powers, colonial revolutionaries, modern liberals, etc.). To others, it was an allegory of modern life (the evil “Empire” may have been the American government instead). It was, as Shone calls it, “virtual patriotism.”⁷² Coupled with its pastiche narrative, pasted together from fragments of Westerns, science fiction yarns and religious allegories, *Star Wars* had broad appeal.

It was this broad appeal that helped launch the *Star Wars* merchandising empire. Here, Lucas proved as shrewd a businessman as he was a filmmaker. Rather than negotiate for a higher percentage of the movie profits, Lucas agreed to take a smaller cut of

⁷¹ By the end of 1977, *Star Wars: A New Hope* had made \$198 million, representing a 50% increase in earnings over 1976 (Shone, 65).

⁷² Shone, 56

the release profits in favor of retention of the merchandising rights. Previously, the market for ancillary merchandise, in the form of toys, posters, soundtracks, etc. was meager at best. Alan Ladd, Twentieth Century Fox's producer for the film, jumped at the chance to cede the merchandising rights in favor of retaining a majority share from the film's proceeds. Included in the merchandising rights were the options for *The Empire Strikes Back* and *The Return of the Jedi*. No studio executive in the mid-1970s could have imagined the merchandizing bonanza the *Star Wars* franchise would hold. According to Shone, by 1981 (the year after *The Empire Strikes Back* hit the box office), *Star Wars* merchandise generated \$1 billion – more than five hundred percent more than the box office earnings.⁷³ Merchandise included lunch boxes, “action figures,” posters, records, stickers and decals – all products aimed at children but bought by adults.⁷⁴

Fans of *Dungeons and Dragons* were often also fans of *Star Wars* and readers of *Batman*. They ranged in age from pre-teen to middle aged. And in the early 1970s and 1980s, their culture concentrated in the comic book store. Comics, games, t-shirts, and various fanboy accouterments were pedaled in the countries first comic book stores. As the decade wore on, these trading posts of fandom grew, both in number and in scope, offering fans an opportunity both to purchase the important articles of their culture and simultaneously providing them with the opportunity to communicate with each other. In *Comic Book Culture*, Matthew J. Pustz describes a typical comic book store:

... Displays of T-shirts and posters greet visitors with icons well known to the store's regulars. On either side are trade paperbacks – comic books and strips collected into hardcover and paperback books (which are not collectible). Above them begins a series of color photocopies of especially rare comic books, from *Action Comics* (the original *Superman* publishers) to *X-Men*, arranged like

⁷³ Shone, 66

⁷⁴ Shone, 63

wallpaper to show the shop's prized inventory. Farther in sits the counter, behind which are boxes of comics reserved for the shop's pull list customers (customers who purchase the same titles regularly). On the counter itself are magazines devoted to comic books, action figures and cult television and movies. Inside the glass case are more expensive items: statues, figurines, watches and cigarette lighters, among other things.

A replica of the head of Chewbacca the Wookiee (from *Star Wars*) directs visitors around the corner and into a special room within the shop filled with toys of special interest to comics fans. Old action figures, from original versions of *Star Trek* heroes Kirk and Spock to Marvel supervillains in their original packages... Once visitors... have gotten past all of these sections, the comic books finally appear...⁷⁵

Pustz's description of Daydream Comics and Cards in Iowa City demonstrates a few important things about comic book stores in general. First, it should be obvious that the store sells much more than comics. Toys, games, trading cards, movie posters, and books all have their place in the comic book store. Second, merchandise pedaled at the store appeals to various subdivisions of fan culture – gamers, Trekkies, and comic book readers alike.

Material like action figures and comic books were not always sold in the same place. Before the 1980s, comic books were sold at newsstands alongside magazines and tabloids. Games and toys were likely sold at toy stores. Responding to the languor of comic book readership that occurred during the 1970s, comic book publishers altered their marketing strategy, allowing comic book stores to keep their overstock and resell them. Under the direct market system, comic book retailers received a substantial discount on their order and in return had to keep any unsold books (under the old system, unsold

⁷⁵ Pustz, Matthew J., *Comic Book Culture*, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999. Pustz's project in the book is, perhaps ironically, in effort to excavate the subcultures that exist within fan culture. While it may be useful to consider how certain groups of readers, viewers and players have come to differ from one another in the early twenty first century, I think it is more appropriate to think of the fan community as a community with varied membership.

books were returned to the publisher at the end of the run). Retailers kept their back issues, bagged them and resold them as collectibles. Direct marketing benefitted both the retailer and the publisher. Publishers could ship more of its titles – both the most successful and the least – with less concern about the number that moved. Retailers could counter overstock by inflating prices and labeling certain issues as collectibles. Retailers also had the added benefit of marketing across the fan spectrum – to sci-fi nuts and Batmaniacs alike.⁷⁶

Direct marketing was not the only development of the 1980s that revitalized the comic book industry. New agreements between Marvel and DC Comics and their respective writers promoted artistic integrity in the industry. Both incentivized sales by giving writers increased payouts for high selling titles. According to Bradford Wright, “the new emphasis on the direct market and the extensions of creative incentives helped to create a comic book star system.”⁷⁷

By the 1980s, fan culture evolved from its early inception in young-adult reading communities of science fiction pulp magazines to include a wide array of cultural materials and texts ranging from blockbuster films to action figures and comics. A Japanese gaming Nintendo company introduced Mario and Luigi, two plumbers from Brooklyn to the video game world, while *Dungeons and Dragons* went into its first revision. Blockbuster films like *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *The Terminator*, following marketing strategy precedent set by *Star Wars*, sold toys, games and novels in addition to tickets for their films. Stephen Spielberg, himself a fanboy, released the film *The Goonies*, in which a group of young fanboys discover buried treasure. Superman appeared on the big screen, while teenagers pumped quarters into arcades.

⁷⁶ Wright, 261-2

⁷⁷ Wright, 263

The explosion of material produced by and for fans provided an outlet for writers to relieve their anger at the state of society in the 1980s. As fanboys flocked to comic book stores to purchase the latest issue of the *Uncanny X-Men* (which featured an ethnically diverse cast of characters ranging from an Egyptian thief who could control the weather to an Eastern European behemoth with super strength and steel skin), the nation waited for the resolution of the Iran Hostage crisis. Crime and punishment was front-row center as Bernhard Goetz “defended” himself real world Gotham City underbelly. The 1980s felt more like high noon to the purveyors of fan culture. By 1986, the year DC Comics published *The Dark Knight Returns*, disparity was a defining characteristic of American life. These disparities played out in the films and comics of the day. Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* is the hallmark of 1980s fan culture. It is credited as one of, if not the first graphic novel, signaling a shift away from comic book disposability in favor of a more adult, permanent cultural form. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Miller articulates and analyzes some of the most important and contentious debates of the time. It has become a foundational text in the fan community and is often identified as a key turning point in the history of fan culture. Chapter Two will therefore be concerned with excavating some of the debates encapsulated in its pages and exploring the relevance of those debates, as well as how Miller’s own politics led him to the conclusions he drew. In particular, I will focus on presentations of masculinity and attempt to explore how productions of masculinity reflect, produce and/or were influenced by certain real world occurrences.

Chapter 2

Holding Out for a Hero:

Heroism and Masculinity in the 1980s

*"I need a hero
I'm holdin' out for a hero 'til the end
of the night
He's gotta be tall and he's gotta be
fast and he's gotta be larger than life"
~Bonnie Tyler, "I Need a Hero"*

In 1984, Bonnie Tyler released the "Holding Out for a Hero." In it, Tyler beckons for a "white knight" to fulfill her "wildest fantasy." Tyler needs a man, a hero who is "strong," "fast" and "fresh from the fight." Tyler's song contains important information regarding the entanglements of masculinity and heroism in the 1980s. Tyler's desire for "a" hero is not speculative – she has a very specific vision of the man she wants: "Hercules," "The White Knight," and especially "Superman."⁷⁸ In the music video, the elusive hero eventually arrives to stave off attacks from three black clad bandits. In the final frame of the video, Tyler kneels in front of her savior, a white-clad cowboy.⁷⁹ Tyler is looking for the Man, Kimmel's mythic figure who is totally assured of his Masculinity.

Tyler was not the only one "I Need a Hero" in the 1980s. The political and social upheavals of the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, both in America and abroad contributed to what President Jimmy Carter called "a crisis of confidence." This crisis has also been identified as a crisis of masculinity, during which the changes in social and political life that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s destabilized the structures maintaining the stability of hegemonic masculinity.⁸¹ It crisis profoundly effected cultural

⁷⁸ Steinman, Jim and Dean Pitchford, songwriters, "I Need a Hero." Columbia Records, 1986.

⁷⁹ Dowdle, Doug, dir. "I Need a Hero", 1984

⁸¹ Carter, James, President, "Speech to the American People" 15 July 1979. Hegemonic masculinity, though difficult to define, is often clearly identifiable. In *Masculinities*, R. W. Connell devotes considerable attention to deconstructing the discursive power of hegemonic masculinity to

productions of heroism during the 70s and 80s. Because fan culture contributed so many presentations of heroism to the culture, it will likely register the crisis anxieties in these presentations. . Narrative shifts and significant alterations to the texture of fanboy culture indicate shifts in notions of masculinity, hegemonic and otherwise.⁸² This chapter will examine Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* in order to understand the influence the crisis of confidence had on productions of masculinity in fan culture.⁸³

Published in 1986, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* epitomizes the dramatic shift in regard for comics as a medium that occurred in the mid-1980s. It was one of the first comics to be granted the title "graphic novel." Published over four consecutive issues throughout the year, *The Dark Knight Returns* tells the story of an aged Bruce Wayne, who has been in retirement for ten years since Robin's murder at the hands of the Joker. In his absence, Gotham City has degenerated into a cesspool of crime and terror. While Batman has locked many of Gotham's most notorious criminals inside Arkham Asylum, the Mutants, a gang of errant teenagers terrorizes the City. In an attempt at ultimate rehabilitation, Bruce Wayne pays for reconstructive surgery to repair Harvey "Two Face" Dent's burned face. But the treatment is merely superficial and Two Face immediately resumes his life of crime. This triggers a series of events that forces Batman out of retirement, leads to The Joker's escape from Arkham and forces final battles between

understand how masculinities vary based on the variety of forces impacting identity. In this case, however, hegemonic masculinity might quickly be defined as the understanding of political and social authority assumed by white, middle-class American men. Both Connell and Kimmel demonstrate that hegemonic masculinity, though ephemeral, is nevertheless important as it serves as point of comparison for men (and women).

⁸² See Jeffords, Susan, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994
, and Gibson, *Warrior Dreams*

⁸³ Susan Jeffords argues in favor of this understanding by claiming that, "During the Reagan Era, popular culture became the mechanism not simply for identifying but for establishing the relationship between the people and the State, through the articulation of that state as the unified national body of masculine character" (13).

Batman and the Two Face, The Leader of the Mutants, The Joker and Superman in the final pages of each issue.

Miller's vision of Gotham City is bleak; the citizens inhabiting it are lost and fearful. They need a hero. Batman returns to Gotham City, after years of hibernation, to save its lost and fearful people from the clutches of crime and terrorism, from the failure of inefficient American social policy and ultimately from their own greed and fear. It is a tale of redemption for both the City and for Batman. Allegorically, it serves as a prescription for the rehabilitation of the American City. In *Secret Origin*, a documentary detailing the development of DC Comics, Paul Pope calls superheroes "ciphers" for humanity, "ways for people to speak about the world."⁸⁴ In this regard, Batman as presented in *The Dark Knight Returns* functions as a cipher for the American man in the midst of crisis.

In the first section, I examine Frank Miller's logic in creating *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). Through reflection on the artist's thoughts and text, and in comparison with other Batman narratives, I hope to demonstrate the decisive shifts from camp to stark reality in Miller's version in order to isolate and highlight the ways in which Miller's presentation reflected the socio-cultural changes in 1980s society. In section two, I will deconstruct the narrative of gender as it is presented through contrasting characters – most notably, Batman and his villain counterparts. This section will delve deeply into Miller's depiction of masculine bodies. Finally, it will explore the ways that Batman's final encounter with Superman represents both a narrative and thematic shift for Miller and the fan community.

⁸⁴ *Secret Origin*. It is not my intention to suggest that Batman's fight against the forces of evil in *The Dark Knight Returns* only reflect the thoughts and feelings of those within the fan community. Nor is it my intention to suggest that all American men looked to Batman for cues about their masculinity. In fact, many were not aware of Batman, or *The Dark Knight Returns*. Nevertheless, the text contains important information about Masculinity and masculinities of the time. Information that is incredibly useful for understanding the interaction between fan culture and heroism.

We Need a Hero

President Carter's reflection on the American "crisis of confidence" encapsulated the various ways that foreign and domestic upheavals in the 1970s upset traditional beliefs in America's status as a superpower. The military failure in Vietnam, race and gender conflicts in America, the advent of radical terrorism in the middle east, economic hardships linked to the energy crisis and stagflation and the Watergate scandal contributed to feelings of anxiety or "malaise" that infiltrated many areas of American life.

Speaking to Kim Thompson of *The Comics Journal* in August of 1985, Frank Miller addressed the ways in which American anxiety manifested in culture. Characterizing the success of Richard Donner's *Superman*, Miller said "... now that the world is good and fucked, the super-hero could be revitalized, could encourage us on a fantasy level to find the strengths we need."⁸⁵ The world to which he referred was the world dominated by malaise: the world of incessant and insistent fears centered on the disruption of what Natasha Zaretsky called the "confident assumptions" of the 1960s and 1950s.⁸⁶ To Miller, the superhero was more than a cipher. He was an idol, a figure to be worshiped and emulated.

In his interview, Miller indicated that American culture makers were complicit in failing to resolve the affliction of malaise. He claimed that Hollywood diluted narratives of heroism, which might otherwise have served as full functioning roadmaps for rehabilitation for its "wounded moral authority."⁸⁷ He characterized true heroism as an inherently masculine, unemotional quality, without any "puny, petty, [or] snotty little emotions." In

⁸⁵ Thompson, Kim, "Frank Miller: Return of the Dark Knight", *The Comics Journal*, August 1995, Volume 191

⁸⁶ Zaretsky, Natasha, *No Direction Home*, Chapel Hill: UNC- Chapel Hill Press, 2007, pg 1

⁸⁷ Zaretsky, and Thompson, 66

short, Miller characterized the superhero as Kimmel's quintessential Man – a figure totally secure in his masculinity. But this happy warrior also needed to be outfitted with the weapons to adequately battle the specters that emerged as villains during the crisis of confidence: governmental impotence, institutional poverty and post-détante Cold War conflicts.⁸⁸ Miller recreated Batman with this logic in mind. "He has to be a very very potent, scary figure in order to even function in (modern times) let alone overpower it," he said of his thoughts on recreating Batman for a reading audience in the 1980s.⁸⁹

Due to previous narrative deviations, Miller had to work against the most recent and most popular presentation of Batman- Adam West's television Batman. Though true fans would obviously have had experience with other presentations of the Caped Crusader, TV's campy, effete Batman worked against the many strides of the Silver Age. So Miller set about retooling the myth-artifact in order to undo the damage done by the TV show. Miller's first task was to recreate Batman's universe to fashion in it in the image of the real derelict American city. And Miller had to look no further than the streets of his own city: New York:

...I had come to regard it as an emotional, psychological and spiritual dead end. It simply costs so much in terms of aggravation and frustration. After eight years it became clear to me that the normal human response to the crime and unending hostility of the city would be to become as ungentlemanly and uncivilized as the city's customs demand. One Bernard Goetz is enough, though I'm amazed there aren't more people doing what he did.⁹⁰

Gotham became an urban jungle, its rank sewers and dismal trash heaps playing the dual role of waste depositories and breeding grounds for criminals and terrorists.

⁸⁸ Bruce Schulman's *The Seventies* and Gil Troy's *Morning in America* detail the political, social and cultural battles of the 1970s and 80s.

⁸⁹ Thompson, 63

⁹⁰ Thompson, 59

His second task was to strip away the fat and fancy of Adam West's Batman and repackaging the hero.⁹¹ Miller characterized Batman as a "force beyond good and evil," who is "plainly bigger and greater than normal men, perfectly willing to pass judgment and administer punishment to make things right".⁹² That Batman is not Superman, and therefore not omnipotent, drew Miller to Batman. "Batman only works if the world really sucks... kids who find the world a big, scary place go for [him]."⁹³ Batman does not fight with the law on his side. Even when he is working with the authorities, the relationship between the two is almost always hostile. More importantly, the new Batman needed to exude Masculinity.

Finally, he needed to reconstitute the narrative. Miller put innocent Americans in the cross hairs of Batman's most vicious criminals, speaking directly to the fears of the 1980s generation and giving his readership the recognizable environment that Slotkin claimed is the most important aspect of myth, Miller presented a narrative that was both about the oppression of the disadvantaged and the dissolution of the mighty, giving it broad appeal, and allowing readers from various walks of life to access it and make key metaphoric connections. He also denaturalized the idea of the infallible hero. Batman is real – he makes mistakes and pays dearly for them.

Miller contributed to the cannon of comic book literature and reflected the cultural dynamics of the 1980s by eliding certain mythological constants and recasting those that did not suit his purpose. He made Batman a tortured, lamenting hero who is as plagued by neurosis as his nemeses. He killed Jason Todd and made the new Robin a girl. Finally, he recast Gotham as a dismal slum, infested with criminals and vice. Miller's presentations

⁹¹ For more on Goetz, see Troy, Gil, *Morning in America*, 179-182

⁹² Thompson, 61

⁹³ Thompson, 64

are not merely the musings of a Byronic poet, but the imagined representation of urban America. It is with this in mind that we may begin the task of decoding the myths of masculinity presented in the pages of *The Dark Knight Returns*.

Let's Get Physical

A tall, well-muscled man stands against a black background. He is naked, bandaged and scarred, an indication of past battles. His hair is gray, a sign that he has long since passed his prime. His brows are knitted together in concentration; his mind set against the evil that lurks outside the cave walls of his underground lair. His right arm is bound in a yellow sling. He holds a young girl, clad in a red, yellow and green costume. Bruce Wayne does not wear the cowl or cape that criminals fear. Yet the figure is undoubtedly Batman. The panel is alarmingly stark. The only color emanates from the girl's costume and the strip of fabric holding Bruce Wayne's injured arm. The lines of the figures are thick and defined, the colors are muted and pale, and the contrast between light and dark is extreme. This panel is typical of Miller's art in the *Dark Knight Returns*⁹⁴ and exemplifies the thematic elements at work in *The Dark Knight Returns*.

In this panel, the reader is meant to view Batman as strong and solitary. Robin, the young, innocent girl Batman is holding, has just saved Batman's life.⁹⁵ This frame establishes Batman's renewed promise to protect Gotham. His expression is determined, reflecting his renewed resolve. His nakedness emphasizes the bodily aspects of his masculinity: his whiteness, his physical power and ultimately his Masculinity. Batman has swaddled Robin in her cape and embraces her in a gesture of paternalistic protection.

⁹⁴ Miller, Frank, *The Dark Knight Returns*, New York: DC Comics, 1986

⁹⁵ Traditionally, Robin is the alter ego of a young boy Bruce Wayne takes on as a ward. Miller chose to set *The Dark Knight Returns* after the death of Jason Todd, the second person to wear the Robin costume. Reports about why Miller chose to make robin vary.

Miller choice to present Batman's in this masculine pose after Robin saved his life indicates his resumption of power. While this arguably exposes Batman's reliance on others, I think it more likely that Miller uses this episode as a way of enmeshing Batman's masculinity with society's need for protection.

Bodies are clearly important to comic book superheroes. But bodies were also important to the crisis of confidence. In Chapter 2 of *Hard Bodies*, Susan Jeffords argues that the 1980s was "an era of bodies." Jeffords explains that hard-bodied political ethics replaced the cerebral intellectualism of the 1960s liberal elite. Jeffords argues that the "indefatigable, muscular, and invisible masculine body" became steeped in the "ideologies and economies" of the Reagan Revolution.⁹⁶ Certain cultural productions, including comics promoted an understanding of masculinity as a symbol for conservative politics.

In their study, "The Body Beautiful" Ericka Reischer and Kathryn S. Koo discuss the "symbolic and agentic capacities" of female beauty.⁹⁷ Though their study focuses on women, their thoughts on competing and cooperating functions of bodies as symbols and agents are compelling and will undoubtedly inform this inquiry into the male body and its power. As far as Jeffords is concerned, the muscular body is a symbolic vessel: it is, as Reischer and Koo argue, "a text upon which social meanings are inscribed." To Jeffords, these inscriptions are clear: the muscular body represents the power and authority of masculinity. Its popularity in the crisis period is, according to her, a response to anxieties produced by the forces that created the crisis of confidence. In other words, 1980s

⁹⁶ Jeffords, 25. According to Jeffords, the hard body acquired a synecdochal relationship to the both the national character and the nation itself. As such, "hardness" symbolized heroism, aggression and determination, while intellectualism was a proxy for either soft, ineffective leadership or conniving villainy. Jeffords primary goal is to contrast the discourses of the masculinist Reagan administration with Jimmy Carter's cerebral peace mongering.

⁹⁷ Reischer, Ericka and Kathryn S. Koo, "The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 33 (2004). Pp. 297-317

Americans imbued the muscular body with meanings of protection, defense, and strength.⁹⁸

But the body's meanings exist in relation to the functions it is meant to perform even if that body is only acting in imagined ways.⁹⁹ Its agency is therefore as important as its symbolism, though more difficult to conclusively identify (especially in a comic book, where it is merely depicted). Reischer and Koo argue that the body, as a projection of the self, is the principle way humans interact with the world, and is therefore the principal mode of action.¹⁰⁰ Action informs experience, which R. W. Connell argues is "central... in our understanding of who and what we are." Bodies serve as both metaphoric representations of power and the principle mechanism by which that power is enacted or forestalled. The symbolic power of the body is like potential energy – only powerful when it is released through action.

Because *The Dark Knight Returns* is a graphic novel, it offers an opportunity to explore both the symbolic and agentic meanings of the body as they relate to gender and power. Frank Miller's depictions of bodies are just that: depictions. They do not interact with the real world, making them the purest examples of symbols. But because the genre is graphic, we literally see Batman's body interacting with the world it inhabits – punching, kicking, getting punched and kicked. Thus, these bodies are also in action, and therefore

⁹⁸ Reischer and Koo, 300; R. W. Connell, *Hard Bodies*, 54

⁹⁹ Consider *First Blood*, a film on which Jeffords bases a lot of her analysis. Clearly, John Rambo does not kill anyone, does not shoot helicopters out of the sky or take over a toy store. These actions are completed in imagined spaces. Here the symbolic and agentic power of the body works in tandem to produce meaning.

¹⁰⁰ Reischer and Koo, 307. Reischer and Koo argue that the terminology used to describe how the body functions and how it is read represent a collection of idiomatic phrases. These phrases are problematic precisely because they are self-referential and self-contradictory. "The self is ultimately an embodied self, and the symbolic capacity of material bodies can thus be "employed" by this self so embodied as one way to act on the world. That is, bodies are not only constitutive of subjectivity, but also mediate the relationship between persons and the world: we meet the world through our bodies. Therefore, bodies necessarily participate in the agency of selves."

expressing their power. Action is arguably the first thing the reader/viewer experiences, and as such, the first experience the he or she has is with the agentic body, rather than the symbolic body.

Interestingly, when Batman reappears, he is completely disembodied. He makes noises (we know from onomatopoetic bubbles); hands and feet disarm and disable henchmen; but Batman himself is not in a single frame of the comic book until page 34. Because Batman is in retirement, his body has lost its symbolic power. The rumors of his return are met with consternation, apathy, or derision. But criminals do not stop committing crimes. Once Batman decides to act again, the power he wields fuses with symbolic understandings of that power. And once his body resumes its usefulness, its symbolic power is recast as powerful, authoritative and most importantly dangerous. What is clear then is that Batman undergoes a metamorphosis between early frames of Bruce Wayne and the depiction of the unmasked Batman who stands resolutely naked. Batman has sublimated Bruce Wayne, his human identity, to the symbolic power of the Batman identity.

The confluence of symbolic and agentic meanings of Batman's body reveals important information about components of masculinity Miller promotes in *The Dark Knight Returns*. In the above panel, Batman is in action, leaping from the top of a building onto a speeding car. His muscles ripple in exertion, preparing to do battle. Symbolism and action work in tandem to producing a vector of power, emanating from Batman's masculine body. If masculinity is, in part a reflection of the power of the male body, then Batman's power emanates from his masculine body. The power of masculine bodies is clearly seen when Batman is compared to his counterparts. Each of the four issues of *The Dark Knight Return* features a fight between Batman and an adversary. As Batman uses his

body as a tool to fight Two Face, the Mutant Leader, The Joker, and Superman, his body, and masculinity by proxy, are tested by forces acting against it. Each of those foes represents a force that is, in one way or another, an assault on masculinity. The rest of this section will be devoted to examining Batman's bodily interactions with his villains and rivals.

The first adversary he faces is Two Face. As with many other elements of the Batman mythos, Frank Miller rescripts the Two Face story in the *The Dark Knight Returns*.¹⁰¹ Bruce Wayne has financed radical reconstructive surgery to repair Harvey Dent's face, obliterating the bodily markers of Dent's criminal identity.¹⁰² Dent marvels at the reflection he sees in the mirror. Where the superficial surgery succeeds, the psychiatric treatment has failed. Immediately after his release, he commits several small crimes and plots to blow up Gotham's Twin Towers.¹⁰³ Once Batman apprehends Dent, he is able to "see" that corrective surgery has produced visual symmetry at the expense of psychological and moral imbalance:

What are you so mad about Bats? I've... been a sport... You have to admit that - - I've played along. And you... you took your joke about as far as it could go... Got the whole world to smile at me... Got the all to keep their lunches down when they looked my... my face... Saying I was cured... saying I was fixed... Take a look... have a laugh. I'm fixed all right. At least... Both sides match.

¹⁰¹ Before becoming a criminal, Two Face was Harvey Dent, a district attorney who helped prosecute many of the criminals Batman captured. Two Face became a criminal after half his face was melted by acid. According to William Graebner, Two Face's introduction to Batman audiences coincided with a general sentiment regarding the uncertainty unleashed by the constellating forces that made up the Second World War. To Graebner, Two Face epitomizes uncertainty, "actually flipping a coin to determine whether he would be a force for good or evil." Aptly, Two Face is the first adversary Batman must face after his retirement. He is the harbinger of crisis; like the Greek god Janus, he signals to the reader both the end and the beginning. See *Detective Comics #66* and William Graebner, *The Age of Doubt*, Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1991.

¹⁰² Miller, 16 - 7

¹⁰³ Miller, 50. Miller's prescience here is astounding. The comic book community, which is centered in New York City, responded to September 11th in a variety of interesting ways, including a special issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Heroes*. For more on this, see Wright, 287-293

Harvey Dent's wounds are both physical and psychological, inflicted not only by the criminal who threw chemicals into his face, but also by the society that reviled him for those wounds. Symbolically, his wounds represent his corruptibility, which is reified through crime rather than crime fighting.

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry argues that pain is without object and is therefore nearly impossible to articulate: "the complete absence of referential content almost prevents it from being rendered in language: objectless, it cannot easily be objectified in any form, material or verbal."¹⁰⁴ Physical and psychological pain cannot be expressed through language; symbolic expression of the body in pain is at best, linguistically elusive, and at worst unspeakable. Consequently, the body in pain loses the ability to speak for and about itself and instead can only act. Criminal acts are therefore expressions of pain: Harvey Dent holds Gotham City ransom, kills its civilians, and destroys its buildings in an effort to bespeak the pain of his disfigurement. Comparing Dent's body to Batman's reveals that the discourse of pain contains an important message about masculinity: that the truly masculine body is whole, and enabled, not fragmented and disabled. Looking back to the passage above in which Batman and Two Face discuss the reconstructive surgery, we also see that Dent's pain has rendered him totally incomplete. Reconstructing his face should have remade him. Instead it destroyed him.¹⁰⁵

In Dent's case, a fractured visage has given way to the sociopathology of terrorism.¹⁰⁶ Once he is subsumed by the Two Face identity, Harvey Dent becomes a

¹⁰⁴ Scarry, Elaine, *The Body in Pain*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1985, 161

¹⁰⁵ In this and other regards the shred of difference between Batman and his adversaries falls to the question of responsibility. Batman fights because of the bereavement he felt after his parents death. See Miller, 22-6

¹⁰⁶ Terrorism is used here to indicate the pathological use of violence against civilians to upset and overturn existing regimes of power. Though Miller calls the mutants a "gang" this seems like an oversimplification as gangs do not traditionally seek to restructure the social order, but instead work prey on the weakest component parts of that order for resources and recruitment. The Mutant

terrorist. In their work on gender and sexuality in the age of the War on Terror, Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai have written about the connection between monstrosity and the terrorist, arguing that there is a concerted effort to construct the terrorist as a monster and therefore a societal other.¹⁰⁷ In this regard, the symbolic meanings of Two Face's pain are first written on his face, endlessly expressed though simultaneously unspeakable. They are then obliterated and become finally unutterable. His monstrosity, however, is never questioned. In *The Seven Basic Plots*, Christopher Booker devotes considerable attention to the construction of the monster story in literature. He argues that there are three versions of the monster; Two Face is an excellent example of the first, the Predator:

[The Monster] wanders menacingly or treacherously through the world, seeking to force or to trick people into its power... it is looking for victims... 'seeking whom it may devour', spreading fear and destruction, and casting a shadow wherever its influence is felt.¹⁰⁸

Two Face is not the only monstrous figure in *The Dark Knight Returns*. Batman is also duty bound to face-off against the leader of the mutant gang. Their moniker indicates their monstrosity. In his first appearance, the Mutant Leader challenges both Batman and Commissioner Gordon. He says, "I myself will kill the fool Batman. I will rip the meat from his bones and suck them dry. I will eat his heart and drag his body through the street." The Leader is obscured in darkness, revealing only a red slit across his face where his eyes should be.¹⁰⁹ When his body is revealed, twelve pages later, it is grotesque; his muscles bulge unnaturally, his teeth have been sharpened into fangs, and his nipples stand erect.¹¹⁰ In their reading of monstrosity, sexual perversity and terrorism, Puar and Rai claim that

Leader himself resists the idea that he runs a "gang," instead claiming instead that his goal is to take over "the world." Miller, 61

¹⁰⁷ Puar, Jasbir, and Amit Rai, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots", *Social Text*, 72 (Volume 20, Number 3), Fall 2002, 117-148

¹⁰⁸ Booker, Christopher, *The Seven Basic Plots*, London: Continuum Books, 2004, 33

¹⁰⁹ Miller, 61

¹¹⁰ Miller, 73

monstrosity operates as a “regulatory construct... that imbricates not only sexuality, but culture and race.”¹¹¹ When the reader first encounters this “mutant,” these characteristics of monstrosity are immediately apparent. Miller’s use of titillation is noteworthy: in the top frame on page seventy-three, the nipples are one of three details to receive color. This is repeated on page ninety-one. The Mutant Leader is also of a potentially different racial category. In the bottom frame of page eighty-one, his skin color is darker —browner – than the grey of Batman’s suit.¹¹²

As Puar and Rai argue:

If the monster is part of the West’s family of abnormals, questions of race and sexuality will have always haunted its figuration. The category of monstrosity is also an implicit index of civilizational development and cultural adaptability. As the machines of war begin to narrow the choices and life chances people have here in America and in decidedly more bloody ways abroad, it seems a certain grid of civilizational progress organized by such keywords as “democracy,” “freedom,” and “humanity” have come to superintend the figure of the monster.¹¹³

In this regard, age and class inscribe boundaries on rational and civilized behavior.

Remember, Batman is older in this comic book (around 50) and wealthy. The Mutant Leader is young, poor and probably parentless. If, as Puar and Rai suggest, democracy, freedom and humanity have come to (and perhaps have always) “superintend” the monster’s agency, they also superintend the measures to which a man can build his body.

¹¹¹ Puar and Rai, 119. Regulating aberrant bodies has been a specific project throughout history. In the 1980s, the AIDS epidemic and the War on Drugs were two ways that governments attempted to exclude members of specifically racialized and sexualized categories in order to produce certain boundaries on citizenship. This is also true in Miller’s text, as I discuss in what follows.

¹¹² Miller, 73, 91, 81. It will become apparent that The Mutant Leader and the Joker are also racialized. Through specific inkings, both appear to be somehow different from the clearly white European characters Batman, Robin, Commissioner Gordon and others. The Mutant Leader’s skin tone is darker and the Joker has white skin.

¹¹³ Puar and Rai, 199-20

The Mutant Leader's musculature is grotesque and therefore undemocratic. Batman, though well muscled, has not ventured into the realm of inhuman musculature and his body is therefore less threatening. Allying oneself with the Mutant Leader is to ally oneself with his body, a body that symbolizes the violent authoritarian aims he hopes to implement in Gotham. Batman, though considerable muscular, is not grotesque and is therefore not a monster.

The fights between Batman and the Mutant Leader are expressions of homosocial admiration. Batman is lured out of the protection of the Batmobile (again a departure for Miller, who depicts it as a tank instead of the traditional modified sports car) by his desire to fight and potentially lose to the Mutant Leader. The Mutant Leader has "exactly the kind of body [Batman] wishes he didn't have... powerful, without enough bulk to slow him down... and he's young... in his physical prime".¹¹⁴ Batman is drawn into a physical battle with the Mutant Leader because of his desire to dominate, a battle he ultimately loses. Though presented with the chance to easily "press the trigger and blast him from the face of the Earth," Batman hesitates.

His hesitation does not stem from compassion, but from admiration and desire - admiration of the body, and desire for the fight. By giving in to these distractions, The Mutant Leader is able to beat Batman. When he returns later, he is able to look past the power of the Mutant Leader's musculature to exploit his weaknesses: his overreliance on his body and his inability to adapt. Batman looks beyond the symbolic association of muscle and athleticism with power, to see that the Mutant Leader is callow, untrained and

¹¹⁴ Miller, 77

vulnerable to distractions. Batman's success ends the Mutant Leader's reign of terror as it reinforces Batman's own confidence in his ability to maintain Gotham.¹¹⁵

In his encounters with both Two Face and the Mutant Leader, the boundary between heroism and villainy is at its weakest. According to Mike Alsford, "true villainy has to do not with our passions or instincts, nor even with the dark thoughts we all have from time to time. True villainy has to do with the desire to dominate, to subsume the other within the individual self and that without compunction."¹¹⁶ Batman suffers from a narrow perspective. But unlike these other figures, Batman is fundamentally allocentric, almost to a fault. He is willing to forsake himself in the interest of society. The Mutant Leader, though more muscular than Batman, is not concerned with protection. His Masculinity is solely rooted in symbolic interpretations of his musculature. Batman's ability to see beyond the symbolic is what ultimately enables him to subdue the Mutant Leader. In order to do so, Batman must shelve his own egocentric desires and focus on the need to save others, the hallmark of his Masculinity.

The third issue of *The Dark Knight Returns* is dominated by Batman's battle with The Joker, who has recently escaped from Arkham. Since his creation in "Under the Red Hood", The Joker has undergone a number of permutations. Notably, Cesar Romero, who played the Joker on TV and Jack Nicholson and Heath Ledger, who played him on the big screen, all brought a unique personality to The Joker. Miller's Joker is perhaps the most sadistic of the lot: depraved enough to target and kill children with the single-minded purpose of luring Batman into a trap.¹¹⁷ Miller's version of the figure was one of the first to suggest that Joker's antisociality and homicidal tendencies were byproducts of his

¹¹⁵ Miller 100-3

¹¹⁶ Alsford, Mike, *Heroes & Villains*, Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006, 120

¹¹⁷ This Joker is most likely the basis for the later film iterations, which became increasingly more vicious in the means they employ to kill Batman following Miller's example.

obsession with Batman. If Batman is the benevolent, yet misunderstood hero, who obsessively seeks to protect humanity from evil then The Joker represents the “dark and negative side of personal obsession... a constant reminder that strength which derives from traumatic experience can be turned towards evil as easily as good”.¹¹⁸

Batman and The Joker animate each other in important ways. The Joker commits crimes precisely because he knows they will draw Batman to him. Conversely, Batman continuously chases and catches the Joker, when killing him would be a much more decisive end. Their relationship is definitively interdependent; one seems unable to exist without the other. More specifically, and in Michael Kimmel’s terms, The Joker’s come-hither tactics are best characterized as homoerotic, while Batman’s fears of and animus towards The Joker are best characterized as homophobic. Miller explores these contrary sentiments in the first pages of *The Dark Knight Returns*. In part one, the Joker is imprisoned in Arkham Asylum, now called the “home for the emotionally troubled.”¹¹⁹ The Joker stares out of his cell, afflicted by blunted affect, apparently caused by Batman’s retirement.¹²⁰ Without an object over which to obsess, The Joker has no need to kill or, it seems, to live. Once Batman reappears and resumes his crime-fighting mantle, The Joker is reinvigorated. He grins madly when he hears that Batman has returned. He says two words in the eight panels it takes for him to fully make the transformation from catatonia to hysteria: “Batman.” and “Darling.” “Batman” obviously lets us know that The Joker knows the object of his obsession has returned. “Darling” clues us into the way The Joker feels about Batman. It signals both proximity and affection. The connotations of this darling are undoubtedly sullied by what we know of The Joker – that he is a depraved killer.

¹¹⁸ Reynolds, 68

¹¹⁹ Miller, 15

¹²⁰ Miller, 15

When Batman and the Mutant Leader fight, they are engaged in the animalistic battle of two males fighting for control of the pack.¹²¹ The fighting between Batman and The Joker is quite different. In many ways, The Joker is everything that the Mutant Leader is not: intellectual rather than muscular, shrewd rather than sturdy, effeminate rather than hypermasculine. Although the Mutant Leader's arms bulge obscenely, it is The Joker's penetrating leers and malicious grin that more powerfully affect Batman. Both are violent, but even their violent tendencies differ.¹²²

The fight between Batman and The Joker differs from the previous encounters with Two Face and the Mutant Leader in another significant way: where Batman effectively subdues Two Face and the Mutant Leader, he recognizes that he will inevitably have to kill The Joker.¹²³ After The Joker kills a troop full of Boy Scouts with poisoned cotton candy, Batman says, "... It ends tonight, Joker."¹²⁴ His antisociality, especially the murder of children, exposes aberrant masculinity. While Batman aims to resolve his role as father figure by taking in a new Robin, corralling a splinter of the Mutant Gang, and generally protecting the innocent, The Joker aims to [draw] Batman [back into] the chase by committing murder.¹²⁵ Miller's characterizations of The Joker lead us to the conclusion that The Joker's antisociality is rooted in both the homoerotic aspects of his relationship to Batman and his own impotent masculinity. He is bodily inferior to Batman and looks like he is wearing makeup.¹²⁶

¹²¹ After all, Batman assumes control of one faction of the Mutants once he defeats the Mutant Leader.

¹²² Miller, 141

¹²³ Miller, 141

¹²⁴ Miller, 140

¹²⁵ After they lose their leader, a faction of the Mutants begins to follow Batman, establishing a vigilante police corps and using extreme measures to curtail crime in the city. They call themselves the "Sons of Batman". Eventually Batman is able to take control of the group and direct them as a force of good.

¹²⁶ This discourse of depraved violence featured prominently in conversations about urban crime. The Joker-Batman relationship metaphorically linked the Joker with predatory criminals, and

Penetration is an key aspect of Batman's final battle with The Joker and ultimately reifies the homoerotic vectors of their relationship. Each penetrates the other: Batman throws a "baterang" into The Joker's eye, while The Joker shoots Batman in the chest and stabs him with a knife. That Batman and The Joker stage their final battle in the Tunnel of Love is not incidental. Once inside the tunnel, Batman and The Joker engage in hand-to-hand combat, which ultimately ends in a deadly embrace. But Batman is unwilling to strangle The Joker. The Joker chastises Batman for displaying this sign of weakness: "I'm really... very disappointed with you, my sweet... the moment was... perfect... ... and you... didn't have the nerve... Paralysis... really..." And then The Joker uses Batman's hold to snap his own back and laughs.¹²⁷ The sexual undertones of this scene are evident in the proximity between The Joker and Batman, their location in the tunnel of love, and the ejaculatory laugh that fills the middle frames of the page.

Batman's three adversaries in the first three issues of *The Dark Knight Returns* represent hostile corruptions of Masculinity in Miller's presentations of three aberrant masculinities. By contrasting these figures with Batman, Miller encapsulates the heroic paradigm as an expression of the Masculine paradigm. But Miller has also set out to deconstruct and reconstruct the heroic paradigm. In the final issue of, Miller pits Batman against his most challenging foe: Superman.

Hit Me With Your Best Shot

Batman with the non-professional, civilian law enforcement. Gil Troy details the civilian response to escalating urban crime in the 1980s in *Morning in America*. Outraged by the lack of support from lawmakers and law enforcement, civilians felt that it was their responsibility to fight back: 'Citizens have to do something about crime themselves. If I was in my car and I saw a kid mugging an elderly man or woman, I'd stop the car, get my gun and kill the kid.' These feelings were reified later in when Bernie Goetz shot four potential muggers on the New York City subway (for more on Goetz, see the conclusion). Rider, Jonathan, *Canarsie*, (New York, 1985), cited in Troy, Gil, *Morning in America*.

¹²⁷ Miller, 146-7

Until now, I have contrasted Batman and his villains to assess how differences in the rendered male body explain certain beliefs about masculinities in the 1980s. But as this is a study of comic book fan literature in that time, it will also be invaluable to consider how Batman differed from other heroes. Miller provides us with the perfect comparison in *The Dark Knight Returns*. The 1960s brought superheroes into contact with one another through the development of the universe system. As a fixture of the DC Universe, Batman exists in the same reality as Superman, Wonder Woman, the Green Arrow and thousands of others. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Miller stages a battle of ideology as an actual fight between Batman and Superman. Oliver Queen, the Green Arrow, is also featured in both the ideological and physical battle.¹²⁸ When Frank Miller spoke to *The Comics Journal* in 1986, he spoke about the differences between some of those heroes. To Miller, Superman represented the optimistic forces of American triumphalism.¹²⁹ He felt that kids “with a sort of happy, benevolent view of the world” favored Superman over Batman, whose fans (both young and old) had a more realistic and perhaps cynical worldview.¹³⁰

In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Superman and Batman function in contradictory ways. *Dark Knight* readers first encounter Superman in the second issue: “The Dark Knight Triumphant”. In the first panel, two speech bubbles emerge from the White House; the president is speaking to an unnamed man. “I like to think I learned everything I know about running this country on my *ranch*...” the President says.

¹²⁸ Recall that in the 1960s, Green Arrow was part of the Green Arrow/Green Lantern series in which he was the liberal left of the pair, who had a decisively cynical outlook. See Wright, 226-8

¹²⁹ Jerry Siegel and Joseph Shuster introduced Superman to the world in 1933. In his seven plus decades of existence Superman has gone through numerous transformations. In 1992, DC Comics “killed” superman in his main continuity (he later returned). According to Wright, the death of Superman is flashpoint in the history of comic books, signaling the end of the classic age of comics, and firmly establishing the modern age as the age of

¹³⁰ Thompson, 1985

"It's all well and good... on a *ranch*, I mean... for the *horses* to be different *colors*... and sizes... as long as they stay inside the fence... its oven okay to have a crazy bronco now and then... But if that bronco up and kicks the fence out and gets the other horses crazy... well, it's bad for business.

As the page progresses, the red and white stripes of the flag become the yellow and red stripes of Superman's insignia. The President asks Superman to neutralize Batman.

"I'd just *hate* to see things get out of... well, I'd just hate that... your country's counting on you...," the President says. "...Yes, sir." Superman replies. "Good boy..."¹³¹

Both the conversation and the graphic panels illustrate the relationship that Superman and Batman have to the government. Superman is America's "boy," its operative, defending America from foreign threats. Although the President doesn't like to use Superman for "domestic affairs," he is willing to use Superman to curtail the threat Batman poses to the institutions whose power he is supplanting. Superman is reluctant to fight Batman. Perhaps their former camaraderie gives Superman pause: "I can talk to him, but-" he says to the President.¹³² Understanding the President's directive to neutralize Batman at all cost, Superman may want to spare himself the pain of killing his old friend. But Superman's reluctance also signals that he may not be able to accomplish the task, an interesting apprehension, considering he is the "Man of Steel."

Superman's apprehensions regarding his ability to defeat Batman in combat become clearer in their first meeting. First, Superman and Batman meet each other as Clark Kent and Bruce Wayne. "Sooner or later," Clark Kent says to Bruce Wayne, "somebody's going to order me to bring you in, somebody with authority." Bruce Wayne responds, "When that happens, may the best man win."¹³³ Competing temporal ideologies that helped define the many cultural struggles of the 1980s –Baby Boomer (Superman) vs.

¹³¹ Miller, 84

¹³² Miller, 84

¹³³ Miller, 115

Gen-Xer (Batman) – are articulated in terms of masculinity.¹³⁴ Superman is unsure that he will have enough power to beat Batman. Batman, on the other hand, consistently diverts anxiety through confidence. “May the best *man* win,” is not merely an incidental, aphoristic response. It is a challenge, the challenge that ultimately leads to his undoing. That Batman is not intimidated by Superman’s powers is the lynchpin in Batman’s plan.

The inevitability of a final battle between Superman and Batman is clear to Oliver Queen as well: “I always knew it’d get down to *you* and the big blue *schoolboy*. Planet’s too *big* for the *two* of you”.¹³⁵ Queen’s comparison here is obvious. Batman is a grownup, aware of the world and its horrors, while Superman is an outsized schoolboy, whose body and power are incongruous with his rationale and outlook. After Queen leaves, Robin and Batman discuss him. Robin says that he “talks like her dad”, who Miller has previously explained is a negligent hippie. Bruce says that he used to be a crime-fighter. Something, apparently the loss of his arm, has left Queen with a sour taste in his mouth for the business.¹³⁶

The inevitability is also clear to Batman, who prepares for the battle by making a special armor-like the Batsuit - and giving Queen an arrow typed with gaseous Kryptonite (the one thing that can harm Superman on Earth). After Superman breaks through the armor, Queen hits him with the arrow, leveling the battlefield. Bereft of the gifts of superhuman speed and strength, Superman’s fears about Batman’s ability to best him in combat come to fruition. Then, we learn what Batman’s “best trick” is: over six panels, Batman beats Superman, commenting on their collective failure: “We could have changed

¹³⁴ According to Miller, Superman represented an antiquated worldview defined by post-war triumphalism, while Batman was a crusader more suitable to a world defined by nuance and subtlety. Thompson,

¹³⁵ Miller, 186

¹³⁶ Superman is somehow responsible for how Queen lost his arm. This is most likely the reason he wants to help Batman beat Superman. Miller, 186

the world... now... look at us... I've become... a political liability... and... you...you're a joke. I want you to remember, Clark... in all the years to come... [...] the one man who beat you."¹³⁷ News helicopters televise the beating and the trick is, of course, to show the world that Superman is more man than super. And then, Batman has a heart attack and dies. Superman cradles Batman, apparently mourning his friend. In that moment, Superman's defeat is final – Batman has shown the world that he is mortal. Moreover, he has proven that Superman's time is up: that superheroes like him are untenable in the society of the 1980s.

But Batman is not dead. Though all the remnants of his life as Bruce Wayne are gone, he, Robin and the Green Arrow, and his reformed Mutant followers, have gone underground to conduct their crime fighting in secret. This ritualistic trial, death and rebirth are emblematic of heroism and fan culture in the 1980s. Like the genre from which he came, Batman needed to purge himself of his own history in order to be relevant in the 1980s. Batman's death and Superman's defeat at the end of *The Dark Knight Returns* are ellipses, foreshadowing the ever-continuing saga of life in Gotham. As Paul Pope claimed in *Secret Origin*, Batman, Superman, and even the Joker and the rest are, in fact, ciphers for decoding the complexities of the late twentieth century world. As the forces of malaise eroded notions of hegemonic masculinity, they increasingly produced anxieties about the stability of America, vis-à-vis notions of American heroism. These notions undoubtedly signal changes in Masculinity and consequent changes in masculinities.

¹³⁷ Miller, 187,194-5. When pitted against each other, Batman and Superman enact the calamity of mutually assured destruction: everything is lost, destroyed in fire and degeneration. Each figure's power will seemingly abnegate the other's. Batman's trick signals that perhaps the moment of victory in the arms race will come when one side out thinks the other. This is echoed in Batman's thoughts on page 168: "Since Wayne Manor's emergency generator hasn't kicked in – and Robin's watch has stopped – I'll assume Russia has taken the lead in the arms race", after they have used a tactical electromagnetic pulse to cripple the United States. The key to winning is not volume, but controlling *power* (in this case, electricity), an obvious moment foreshadowing the end.

The Dark Knight Returns's importance to the fan community cannot be overstated. The work was largely responsible for revitalizing the ailing genre and for bringing critical support to comic book literature from other communities. It sold out four times in its original print run, a record for any comic or graphic novel of that time.¹³⁸ When DC decided to republish the issues as a collective, graphic novel, they connected comic book literature with the wider literary community. Later works, like Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* drew on the dark and drab world Miller created in *The Dark Knight Returns*.

¹³⁸ Carter (dir), *Secret Origin*

Conclusions:
Smooth Criminals:
Fantasy and Reality in the Age of *The Dark Knight*

*He acted out dreams of retaliation that most people
resolve through fantasy.*
Psychologist Morton Bard, on Bernard Goetz to *Time
Magazine*

In *Superman on the Couch*, Danny Fingeroth, a former comics writer and critic, explores the psychoanalytic elements of comic book superheroes and their villain nemeses. In exploring the new Batman mythos that developed following Frank Miller's presentation in *The Dark Knight Returns*, Fingeroth explains that Batman became a mediator for rage and anger. But the urban world of the 1970s and 80s did not have a real life Batman to protect "innocent" civilians from its criminals.¹³⁹ When a New York City transit worker shot four black youths, the real world received a palpable lesson in the contrast between fantasy and reality.

According to Gil Troy:

Bernhard Hugo Goetz, a gawky, thirty-seven-year-old, white engineer, had been riding on the IRT number 2 line just north of Chambers Street on December 22 (1984), when four black teenagers armed with sharpened screwdrivers asked him for the time, then for a match. When the teenagers, hovering around Goetz, asked for \$5, Goetz said, "yes, I have \$5 for each of you." Whipping out a pistol, he shot (them).¹⁴⁰

A 1985 *Time Magazine* feature detailed Goetz's life as the son of child molester and the victim of violent crime. In it, Goetz was painted as a thin, slouched nerd, more at home with machines than he was with other humans. Before the 1984 shooting, Goetz "pestered" New York City agencies to "do so something about the litter, the junkies and

¹³⁹ Fingeroth,

¹⁴⁰ Troy, 180

the homeless.” After the shooting, Goetz became the standard around which disaffected urban-dwellers congregated, despite the fact that he fled the scene, dismantled the weapon and disposed of it and the blue windbreaker he was wearing when he fired the weapon. The ironies of a crime fighter who fought one criminal act with another did not displease many Americans.¹⁴¹ Instead, some applauded Goetz’s willingness to act.

In his own mind, Goetz was a captive – held hostage in his own city by poor, black youth who had no regard for the rule of law. He, like many other Americans, was skeptical of the authorities’ abilities to keep him safe. But the Goetz incident also points back to a crucial aspect of the captivity narrative – feminization. In the traditional narrative, the captive is a woman. Urban crime was therefore not only a troubling source of civil unrest; it was also a force of emasculation. Asserting his own power; buying a gun, by whatever means necessary; and then using that gun in apparent disregard for the law betrayed Goetz’s need to assert his own masculinity in a climate in which he felt under constant threat.

When Bernhard Goetz responded to the trauma of life in the city, by shooting four would-be black muggers on a New York City subway the real life vectors of vigilante justice became all-too enlivened. Goetz’s actions throw the importance of Batman and other elements of fan culture into sharp relief. As psychologist Morton Bard said to *Time Magazine* in 1985, Goetz enacted “dreams of retaliation most people resolve through fantasy.”¹⁴² *Time’s* description of Goetz matches the description many people would give if asked to describe the typical comics fan.

¹⁴¹ Stengel, Richard, Marcia Bauber and Barry Kalb, “A Troubled and Troubling Life”, *Time Magazine*, 8 April 1986

¹⁴² Stengel, et al.

The differences between fantasy and reality illuminate Batman's importance as a figure cultural figure. As Fingeroth suggests, Batman mediates our apparent rage and disgust at the state of society. His own code of conduct regulates his violence in order to prevent such incidents like the real like vigilantism of Bernhard Goetz. What Goetz' lacked, then, was the ability to mediate his violent thoughts through fantasy. His choice to carry out his violent thoughts also reflect a disconnect from a moral code. Batman is conversely governed by an inability to let violence control him.

In this drama of outrage, the city is a major player. The exaggerated slum Miller has depicted (which, incidentally, Tim Burton and his production designer adapted for the film) necessitates a Batman-like figure, unbound from the laws that govern law enforcement. But the Batman fantasy, especially in his harsh presentation in *The Dark Knight Returns*, also reveals skepticism on the part of the readers regarding the ability of law enforcement institutions to police criminal activity. Susan Jeffords explains that contrasting ineffective institutions with the lone warrior was a key strategy for conservative politics in the 1980s and certainly was a key for President Reagan's electoral victories.

The illusion of fantasy was the crucial ingredient in many of the various productions of fan culture. The variety of comic books, films, video and role playing games and television shows that are marketed to fans and of which fans partake are often the very fantasies used to vent pent up rage and aggression. *The Dark Knight Returns* was one such fantasy - a fantasy of empowerment, in which a lone hero fights for the salvation of the citizens.

From his (or her) earliest inception in the hearts and minds of the young Jewish American science fiction readers of the 1920s to his position at the height of the pop culture hierarchy, many superheroes have functioned in this way. What was different

about Miller's Dark Knight was, then, his ability to reach beyond the young adult readership and speak to adult (male) audience about adult (male) issues. *The Dark Knight Returns*, which was partially responsible for increasing comic book credibility, also contributed to renewed interest in reading comics in the 1980s after a period of languor in earlier decades. Miller's handling of the characters as well as his appeal to the darker parts of the fantasies of empowerment also contributed to the cultural importance of *The Dark Knight Returns*.

But Miller's work was more than just a seminal text in the comic book genre – it also contributed to the growing sense that 1980s heroism was different than other, older notions of heroism. These notions, bound up in particular visions of masculinity reveal the dark desires dreamt by American fans. Later *Batman* writers and directors Tim Burton, Christopher Nolan, Alan Moore and Jeph Loeb all looked to Miller's re-imagination of the figure for inspiration in their own contributions to the Batman mythos. Together, these stories comprise a mythology of Masculinity through which we can better understand the psychology of the American fan. In this moment, when superheroes rule the box office and video games companies earn more than banks, it is to this point in time – to the release of *The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986 – that we should look to better understand our society's fascination with superheroic fantasies.

Chart 1

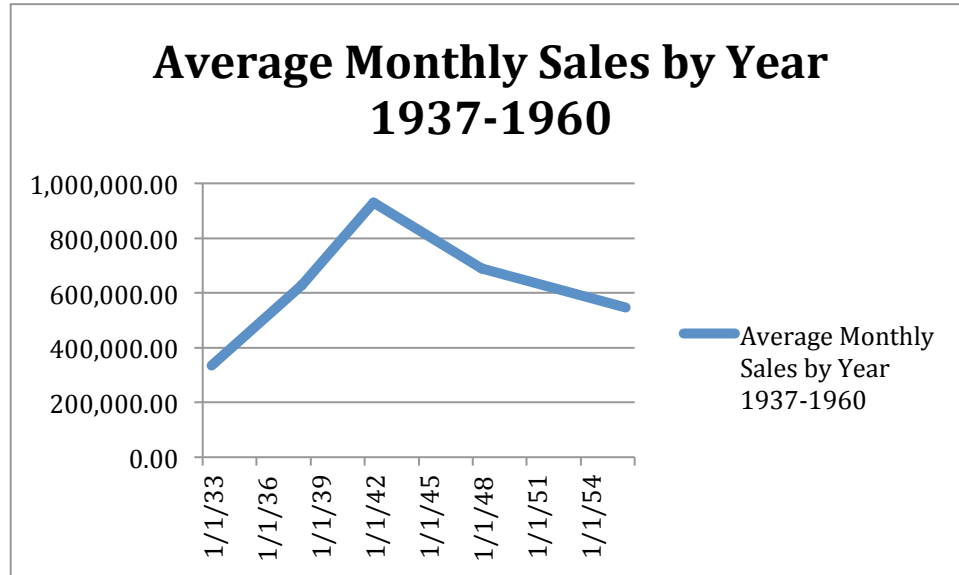
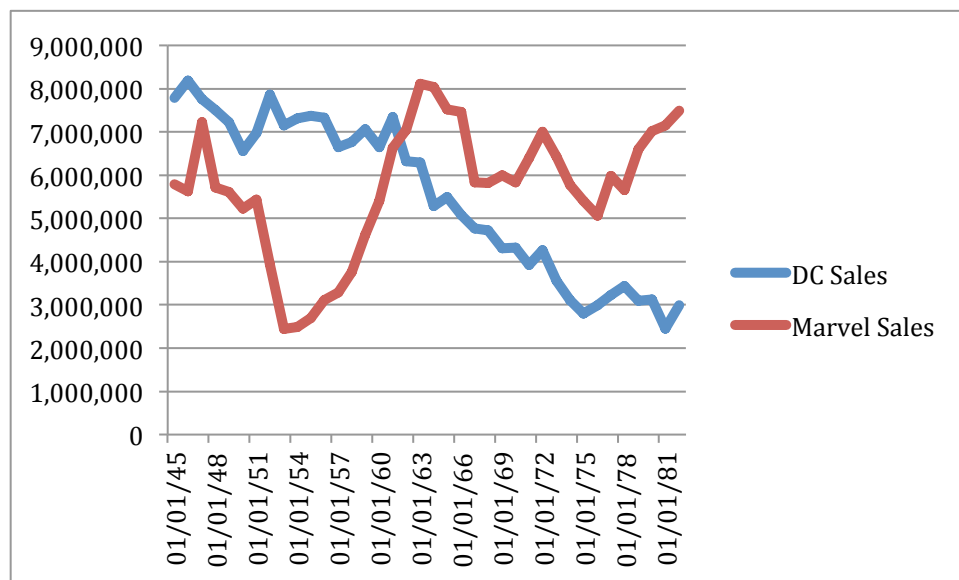


Chart 2

Comparison: Yearly Sales from 1950 – 1987, Marvel Comics and DC Comics



Figures courtesy of internet fan zines "The Comic Chronicles" and "EntertheHistory".

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