The World Ozymandias Made: Utopias in the Superhero Comic, Subculture, and the Conservation of Difference

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> Revolution is the triumph of freedom; its organization is based on spontaneity, not on the dictates of a ''hero'' who imposes himself through violence. It is a continuous and systematic elevation of a people, following the lines of a hierarchy, and creating for itself one by one the organs that the new social life demands.
>
> —Antonio Gramsci

The vast majority of comic book heroes could be considered genetic representations of the übermensch, but, by and large, they exhibit none of the Nietzschean imperatives, rarely attempting to convert humanity or demonstrating any manifestation of Zarathustra's nausea. But, amid the morass of genetic supermen and -women are various attempts at four-colored analogues of the übermensch, differentiated by ideology and intention. The best representations of Friedrich Nietzsche's übermensch are Bryan Talbot's Luther Arkwright and Adrian Veidt, from Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, and, most importantly, Moore's re-creation of Miracleman. In the case of Veidt, as the character explains:

Entering school, I was already exceptionally bright, my perfect scores on early tests arousing such suspicion that I carefully achieved only average grades thereafter. What caused such precociousness? My parents were intellectually unremarkable, possessing no obvious genetic advantages. Perhaps I decided to be intelligent rather than otherwise? Perhaps we all make such decisions, though that seems a callous doctrine. (Moore 1986, 11; 8)

Veidt simply overcame humanity, he transcended the bounds yoked upon him by culture and achieved his genetic potential, thereby becoming the "world's smartest man." Combined with his intellectual superiority is an unsurpassed athletic mastery: Veidt is the fulfillment of the genetic promise of humanity, achieved through a self-improvement course much like Charles Atlas', advertised on the back of the pirate comics within *Watchmen*, which includes a:

series of physical and intellectual exercise systems which, if followed correctly, can turn YOU into a superhuman, fully in charge of your own destiny. All that is required is the desire for perfection and the will to achieve it. (Moore 1986, 10; 32)

Charles Atlas' advertisement, which is being pastiched by Veidt, ran in comic books for nearly fifty years, urging "90 pound weaklings" who inhabited the beach only to be picked on in front of their girlfriends by stronger, more handsome men (presumably like Charles Atlas), to send money to Atlas for a subscription to his life changing self-improvement course. This advertisement ran co-extensively to the adventures of young Billy Batson, who, by uttering the magic word "Shazam!" turned into the miraculous Captain Marvel (who was the initial template for Miracleman[1]). Comic books pandered, and still do, to the kind of introverted child, generally boys, who are gifted with imaginations that often place them in roles like St. George, Neil Armstrong, and, of course, Batman and Superman. Charles Atlas, a mere human being, proved that a "magical" transformation could take place for even the most under-nourished "90 pound weakling," and that it was only a matter of time before they could don the refinements of their idolized four-colored heroes and trounce their personal Lex Luthors. For years, comics have proffered the advertisements of Charles Atlas, and other self-improvement courses designed to make muscle-bound studs out of "90 pound weaklings." Veidt is implicitly the result of such a course, showing at once the validity of the years of advertisements (no longer found in the pages of comics) and the potential for all of humanity, truly a hero for the people and by the people—proof that the übermensch is attainable through hard work and determination.

Conversely, Arkwright has a unique genetic predisposition that leads to his eventual transformation into:

Blake's "Cosmic Man" freed from "mind forged manacles": Jung's god buried deep in the psyche: The whole person: the ultimate realization of potential: Nietzsche's übermensch: the word made flesh: an avatar. (Talbot 1997, 129)

And yet, Arkwright's concerns are vague—he works as an operative of a trans-dimensional policing agency, apparently making every dimension a better place, but in his two series he becomes embroiled in rather petty politics. As Moore writes in *Miracleman*, of yet another Nietzschean übermensch: "Have you ever thought how little he must care about us? As a species? Have you ever thought what we must look like to him? Like animals…like frightened, stupid animals (*MM* 4)." Part of being superior is an alienation from humanity because of that superiority. And while Miracleman begins the series lacking concern for humanity, over the course of the narrative, his concerns become more and more terrestrial, and humane in nature, in part due to the influence of Miraclewoman. And through the ideological shift that corresponds to his coupling with Miraclewoman, Miracleman "goes under," working to establish a utopian society on Earth, knowing neither borders nor restraint. These are exceptional characters, and what is curious is that amid a genre that is typified by its use of "super" men and women, true übermensch are few and far between. My proposal is that the appearance of such characters is limited by comic book fandom and the discourse that they authorize.

Comic books and their readership provide a perfect model of Michel Foucault's "discourse"[2]—comic book fandom is a subculture predicated upon its language of difference, which relies, in part, upon continuity similar to Foucault's critique of the theoretical construction of history with a vocabulary of names, places, and events particular to the community, employed within the culture to communicate, and outside of the culture to promote itself as culturally important while retaining difference. This continuity, and the knowledge of this continuity, as Richard Reynolds has earlier argued in *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (1992), is an essential component of the discourse of comics. Much like soap operas and other serialized media, comics develop sequentially on both a micro and macro level,[3] which leads to the development of complex histories that, while stretching back for the characters only a matter of a few years, stretch back for the audience and writers

years, and often decades. These growing complexities have resulted in comic companies attempting to reset histories to their beginnings and reduce characters to their fundamental selves.[4] John Byrne's *Man of Steel* (1986) series was an attempt to simplify Superman, who, after fifty years of being serialized monthly in two comic books (and later four), had a far too complex and intricate history for many readers and most writers to follow, unnecessarily complicating the discourse and resulting in discontinuities; Byrne's work was itself eventually subverted and again made quite complex. This continuity is a vital part of comic books, and relies upon the imagination and memory of its readership to retain fluency in storylines, and often very discrete subplots, that can take months and sometimes years to develop fully, helping to demarcate distinctions between fans, and thereby promoting hierarchical structures of knowledge. Reynolds draws significant distinctions among various types of continuity: serial (from one episode to another), hierarchical (power relationships between characters), and structural (the entire history of a universe, including that of the real universe's co-opted materials) (Reynolds 38). Reynolds concludes that

Continuity, and above all metatextual structural continuity, is the strategy through which superhero texts most clearly operate as myths. … The continuity of the individual character, and the relationship of that character with the entire "universe" which they inhabit, provides a guarantee of the authenticity of each individual story. (Reynolds 45)

Understanding the nature of comic book discourse requires the systematic dismantling of core narratives that help to structure both the subculture of comic book fans and the language of the discourse itself. As such it is vital to understand the distinction between the utopian narrative as conceived in superhero narratives from those narrative modes thematically similar (science fiction and fantasy), differing both in structure and, most importantly, ideological content.[5]

Science fiction, as a genre, and one particularly concerned with utopia, has, by and large, avoided documenting the process by which utopia is achieved. This is to say that science fiction relies on an "after-effort narrative," allowing a stranger to come to a strange place who then learns of its atypical social structure, thereby allowing the author to transmit the blueprints of utopia to the audience; the narrative is constructed to reveal the

inadequacies of utopia, either by its inability to accept the outsider or its inevitable social failure, in either case proving the faults of utopia. Science fiction is unconcerned with the process, and more interested in the effects. Superhero comics, conversely, are wholly concerned with the process and unconcerned with the results: Superhero comics eschew the after-effort narrative in exchange for a narrative that reveals the inability to achieve utopia, regardless of rationale. As agents of the law, the vast majority of superheroes are intent on retaining the status quo, subservient to the popular politics and will of the people they endeavor to protect. These heroes fail to uphold the philosophical responsibility that Friedrich Nietzsche thought so vital to the position of the übermensch, whose purpose was to "go under," to bring to humanity the lessons learned, metaphysical or otherwise, as post-humans, in an attempt to affect utopia. Thus there are those heroes who "go under" in an attempt to radically affect humanity, marginalized and few, and the larger society of heroes who simply preserve what has already come to be. And necessarily there is tension between these two factions, the first appearing lawless and as vigilantes, while the latter retain their heroic stature and as such are lauded, when, in fact, they are acting against humanity, rather than for it, retaining the hegemonic capitalism they defend, rather than promoting utopia. Most interesting of all are heroes that fail to conform to the conservative ideology—heroes that are often seen as terrorists to the societies that they are a part of, but to the reader, existing outside of the fictional world, the truth of their heroic actions is better understood for the struggle that it is. Traditionally this includes such well-known characters as Spider-Man and the X-Men, and finds its roots in the nihilistic actions (which may or may not be heroic as well) of one of Marvel's earliest heroes, Namor the Sub-Mariner.[6] The comics that fall in to this realm of idealism (and terrorism by extension) include some of the most vital in all of comic book history, particularly due to their political content: Alan Moore's *Miracleman* (1983) and *Watchmen* (1986), Mark Gruenwald's *Squadron Supreme* (1985), Roger Stern's *The Mighty Avengers* 238-54 (1985), and more recently Warren Ellis and Mark Millar's *The Authority* (1999-2002). My concerns here are the actions that the heroes undertake, for the sake of humanity, the response of conservative heroes to these actions, and the understanding of the comic book reading "interpretive

community" of these actions, and the nature of the comic book discourse as well as the ideology that informs it. My purpose here is to come to an understanding between comic book fandom and the sorts of narratives that they disallow—through an analysis of these "disallowed" narratives, further understanding of the complex discourse of comic book fandom should be achieved.

America's Greatest Heroes:
The Avengers, the JLA, and the Squadron Supreme

The Avengers and the Justice League of America are the quintessential superhero teams for their respective companies, Marvel and DC Comics. Both have fluctuating memberships, but are classically constituted of their respective companies most iconic (if not always the most popular) heroes and heroines: The Avengers consists of Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, and the lesser known Scarlet Witch, Hawkeye, Wasp, and The Vision. The Justice League consists of Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, and the lesser known Green Lantern, Aquaman, and the Martian Manhunter. Because these teams bring together some of the most popular of each company's heroes, they act as touchstones to the continuity of the company's series: A reader could read only *JLA* or *The Avengers*, and in both cases have a decent understanding of the state of many characters vital for the company-specific discourse. Both teams have been based in the United States (in New York City—as if this is representative of the country as a whole), although the JLA has since moved base to the moon (an American space?), and through their hegemonic activities have garnered government sanction, allowing them, much like police officers, to break the law in order to uphold the state. The Justice League has never acted against the United States government in its forty year history; The Avengers have often endangered their favored position as "America's Superteam" by making decisions counter to the government (although they always act in the best interest of hegemonic capitalism, even if the government is temporarily unaware)—only in Vision's bid for world domination (*Avengers* 238-54), his attempt at utopia, have the Avengers ever attempted to entirely subvert hegemonic capitalism (but even in that attempt, Vision's desired results are necessarily vague). Thus, if either team were to subvert

hegemonic capitalism by instituting a utopian political regime led and imposed by superhumans, not only would they be critiquing the political inequities in their fictional world, but also those same inequities in the reader's own as they are situated within the metatextual structural continuity of our real world.

In *Avengers* 252, Vision's long anticipated bid for utopia via world domination reaches its culmination as he vows: "I have to save humanity from itself!" (Stern 252, 22). This realization of responsibility on the part of the synthetic man comes after a discussion with Captain America, long an emblematic figure-head of the United States, and the superhero tradition, and as such often viewed as a conservative force—while patriotic, he is apolitical. Their conversation explores the borders between the fascistic status-quo heroes and their rebellious brethren, in which Vision asks:

What would you do if you could bring peace and prosperity to the entire world…but only at the cost of your own personal well-being, perhaps your own existence? …We have all put our lives on the line many times to stop world-threatening menaces, but it occurs to me that we've seldom tried to do anything to cure the world of its ills.… What if you could make the world a paradise, but you could never enjoy it yourself? Could you do it?

Captain America responds:

It pains me to say this, Vision, but I honestly don't know. I don't believe I could know unless the situation actually presented itself. Life should never be given up lightly, but...if there were a way to truly save the world...I'd like to think that I'd make the sacrifice. But I'd have to be certain that it would work! (Stern 252, 6-7)

Their conversation is cut short due to their need to respond to an act of race hatred that requires their attention, but not before Vision has a chance to think that he "has a way … and only [he] can make it work" (Stern 252, 7). And with that, Vision launches one of the earliest bids in comics for a world ruled by superhumans. In the succeeding issue, upon Captain America's learning of Vision's success in taking over the world's computer systems, and thus the world, he vows to stop Vision (Stern 253, 22), thereby revealing himself as the more conservative force

that his earlier comments to Vision would seem to deny.[8] It is only when Vision's identity is endangered through his bid for world domination, becoming diluted by the power of the computer infrastructure that he took control of in order to control humanity, that he relinquishes power—his destruction is not worth the possibly utopian outcome. Ultimately Captain America offers Vision this absolution:

You fell prey to your own ego, your own emotions. But there was never any meanness in your actions. You might have been wrong, but everything you did was intended to ease pain and suffering.... In the end, you recognized your mistake and tried to correct it. (Stern 254, 23)

The heroes fail to pursue the morality of Vision's actions, and Captain America provides the *deus ex machina*, a recurring thematic device in the utopian attempts in comics, the noble goals of Vision are all but forgotten as his desires for a better world are followed by a more pressing and tangible foe than an imperfect world.

The Squadron Supreme is Marvel Comics' "clone" of the Justice League of America (a property they have no rights to), used by Marvel to explore the possibilities of a meeting between the Avengers and the Justice League without running the risk of legal action.[9] "Clones" are characters that resemble other established superheroes, both in costuming and abilities, much in line with Umberto Eco's notion of the "ironic."[10] The clones have their own lives, their own continuity, and their own costumes (which is the essential mark of difference between the original and the copy in this case), but in their presence they make reference to the original—if the original is known, which it usually is, as clones are only created to make use of popular characters otherwise inaccessible due to copyright. Thus, Squadron Supreme pastiches the Justice League of America: Hyperion is a clone of Superman, Power Princess of Wonder Woman, Nighthawk of Batman, the Whizzer of the Flash, Doctor Spectrum of Green Lantern, and so on. This process of cloning allows the authors to partake of a particular aspect of the discourse of superhero comics, providing their readers with familiar iconography while failing to directly confront them with the truth behind the characters—it may be comforting to know that Superman can never impose his utopian regime, however utopian it may seem, for if he can impose utopia, then

he can surely impose dystopia, and it is only a matter of ideology that saves us from one or damns us to the other. The choice of Marvel Comics to portray a utopian plan affected by their Justice League clones rather than clones of their own heroes (or their own heroes for that matter), acts as a critique both of the more popular superheroes (Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman), and the superhero genre itself.

Mark Gruenwald's 1985 *Squadron Supreme* series explored the possibilities of a pantheon of American superheroes that, after a third world war, decide to rid the world, or at least the United States, of all its deficiencies. They tackle hunger, poverty, war, and crime, although the vast majority of the series concerns itself with the moral ambiguity of a behavior modification machine, which was originally invented to rehabilitate criminals, but inevitably used for the selfish ends of one of the main characters, the Golden Archer (thus the series is more about the corruption of superheroes failing to be held in check by their constant battles with supervillains—as long as superheroes are acting like superhumans, their "human" aspects will fail to emerge). Hyperion, the Superman-clone of Squadron Supreme, begins the series when he vows, on behalf of the Squadron

…To eliminate hunger, poverty, war, crime, disease, pollution, and oppression within—one year from tonight! …We are the world's best hope…. I hope you will all join us in ushering in a new age of trust and friendship and unity for all the earth! (Gruenwald 1, 41)

Earlier in the same issue, included in the list were also "equality among all people" and "even [curing] death itself" (Gruenwald 1, 21). Nighthawk, the Batman-clone,[11] takes exception to the implied fascism that would be required on the part of the Squadron to affect such widespread social change, and rallies a group of former supervillains and obscure heroes to battle the Squadron's utopian efforts. The final issue of the series details the culmination of this rebellion, resulting in the deaths of numerous characters, including Nighthawk, and the utopian dreams of the Squadron. Hyperion finishes the series with these words, acting as the *deus ex machina*:

There was a danger in calling ourselves the Squadron Supreme. We began to believe that we always knew what we were doing…that our

noble ends justified our ignoble means. Before he died, Nighthawk made me see that in our haste to save the world, we never considered the long-range consequences of our deeds. Ours is a precarious utopia, built with the most dangerous tools yet devised. We dare not make society dependent upon them. I hereby move we disband the Squadron Supreme, and dismantle the system we instituted. (Gruenwald 12, 41-44)

Nighthawk, and by extension the whole of the Squadron, squander their evolutionary position in favor of a lower, selfish morality. Humanity exists to be surpassed, much like any other product of evolution—it is the responsibility, and evolutionary necessity, of the new race that follows to show the way for those who remain lesser. Nighthawk's rationale for his devolution of the utopia that the Squadron had labored for a year to produce, at the cost of lives and the concession of rights, is that without the Squadron to enforce the utopia that it helped to create, humanity will quickly revert to the dystopian life before the Squadron's efforts. This suffers from flawed logic: Both Hyperion and Power Princess, the Squadron versions of Superman and Wonder Woman, are effectively immortal if their DC counterparts are any thing to judge by, and, according to the "Law of Overmen," with the genesis of one übermensch, others are sure to follow, thus there will always be new generations of the super-powered to enforce utopia (which Moore makes repeated mention of in *Miracleman*). This is even further subverted by Hyperion and Power Princess's romantic involvement and the children of both the Whizzer and Arcana, who will surely grow within their parents' ideologies and with similar powers. It may eventually be an inbred race of superhumans, but as long as they hold their parents' ideals, there will be superhumans enough to retain utopia.

Cui Bono? Return of the Übermensch Mentality

Unlike Miracleman, with his concern for humanity, Dr. Manhattan and Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias), from Moore's *Watchmen*, demonstrate contempt for the genetically inferior, evocative of the Nietzschean concept of "nausea"—that which bars the übermensch from "going under" and raising up humanity. While Dr. Manhattan finds himself growing more and more out of touch, and through this experiences a growing sense of miscomprehension and contempt, Veidt so actively

underestimates humanity that he provides the underlying plot of *Watchmen*, hoping to show humanity the errors of its ways, hoping to affect a transition to utopia through his idealistic, if misguided, plans. Dr. Manhattan, by his presence alone, has begun to affect utopia, although it results in simple technological advancements[12] rather than widespread political transformation (and it might be sensible to ask whether any country that reelects Richard Nixon for the fourth time can be politically liberated); the difference is that Veidt's plans can be stopped, whereas the change affected by Dr. Manhattan's presence is inevitable (and largely inconsequential), and as such Rorschach must combat Veidt, being powerless to return humanity to a pre-Dr. Manhattan state of purity.

More convoluted than *Squadron Supreme*, *Watchmen* involves clones of clones—Nite Owl is a clone of Blue Beetle (a Charlton Comics superhero from the 1960s), who himself was a clone of Batman.[13] As such, while partaking of the common discourse of superhero comics, offering the familiar iconography of costumes and superpowers, Moore distances his critique of fascism and fanaticism from the heroes that his heroes pastiche, which are heroes from the publisher who produced *Watchmen*, DC Comics. Thus, like the Squadron Supreme, *Watchmen* implicitly critiques the Justice League of America (Batman, Superman, Green Arrow, Wonder Woman). As monumental in scope and influential to the field as Moore's *Watchmen* was, Moore ultimately felt that it had failed, as too many readers identified with Rorschach rather than the more complex Veidt or Dr. Manhattan.[14] Veidt especially, but also Dr. Manhattan, struggles on the part of humanity, attempting to make a better world for those less rich and powerful. In the true sense of the word, Veidt is a Nietzschean übermensch, a man who has succeeded in becoming something more than the proscriptions of humanity normally allow, has overcome his nausea, and is still bound to his genetic precursors, willing to uplift them. Additionally, he has reached this point through a process of enlightenment: he has transcended humanity not through some gamma radiation accident or some accident of birth on a doomed planet, nor even through a tragic loss of loved ones at an early age, but through concerted effort of human will, through meditation and exercise, available to all of humanity. Rorschach's popularity among readers, and supposed centrality to the series as seen in Richard Reynolds' plot

summary of the series in *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*
(Reynolds 105), is admittedly disturbing. And his popularity
may be as simple as this: Rorschach is misanthropic, has poor
social skills, and is ostracized by his peers and society; Veidt,
on the other hand, is handsome, intelligent, and bourgeois;
Dr. Manhattan is omniscient and omnipotent, essentially a god.
Who is an adolescent male reader supposed to identify with, and
who is he most likely to identify with? And it is Rorschach who
most opposes Veidt's plan for utopia, planning, even after
Veidt's machinations are completed, to return to society and
inform them of the author behind utopia; it is in this light that
we must read the epithet for the series, published on the last,
blank page: "Who watches the watchmen? …Quoted as the
epigraph of the Tower Commission Report, 1987." Through the
petty actions of Rorschach, the world Ozymandias made is no
world at all—Rorschach's diary has fallen into the possession of
yellow journalists and the truth of utopia is revealed. With its
revelation as constructed, the new world order must inevitably
fail. Rorschach, the adolescent, has preserved dystopia.

The heroes of *Watchmen* can be read as emblematic of
political ideologies: Rorschach is a radical conservative, Dr.
Manhattan a conservative, Silk Specter indifferent or neutral,
Dan Drieberg a liberal, and Veidt a radical liberal; The
Comedian's politics, while rather conservative in nature, are
representative of the American public, and if he is to be similarly
graphed, would be placed in a position similar to Silk
Specter—he exists purely to foil the other characters rather
than foiling a specific character (as Veidt does Rorschach). The
narrative can then be read as a conflict between ideologies
rather than conflicts between characters. While the whole of the
narrative is convoluted, necessary for this argument is the core
narrative: Veidt sacrifices the lives of millions of New Yorkers in
the face of an escalating Cold War in an attempt to affect a
solidification of humanity in the face of such tragedy. The other
heroes become embroiled in the utopian plot as Veidt, in order
to secure his plan, assassinates The Comedian; Rorschach
begins an investigation, which then involves the other heroes,
ending in the confrontation of Veidt and his plan by the other
heroes. Inevitably, as Rorschach confronts Ozymandias, and
Ozymandias' plans for achieving utopia at any costs, Rorschach
must act conservatively: Regardless of the effects that his
actions might have on the new civilization that Ozymandias has

helped to foster, they must be taken to conserve the Cold War dystopia that is the status quo. Moreover, the final confrontation among all the characters is a meting of political ideologies, and of them it is only Rorschach who ultimately dissents and chooses the dystopian status quo in the name of "justice," operating, as he does, under a pro-state ideology.

Conclusion: Conservative Reading Strategies and the Truncation of Desire

Eschewing the iconographic discourse that its utopian predecessors embraced, Warren Ellis's *The Authority*, while including a Batman-clone and a Superman-clone, the Midnighter and Apollo, respectively, consists of superpowered individuals who choose not to wear costumes in favor of street clothes (with the exception of Apollo and Midnighter). Rather than the conflict of ideologies that the heroes in *Watchmen* face, the members of the Authority agree on means and end, conflicting only with the conservative ideologies of superpower-less governments. And while the characters vow to change the world, to usher in a utopian reality (one policed by superhumans in much the same way that the Squadron Supreme's world was to become), threats to the Earth and humanity distract them from being able to alter the sociopolitical inequities that face the superpower-less. *The Authority* began in 1998 with the auspicious claim of Ellis that "these stories [are] about that thing that superhero stories never seem to get around to. Making the world a finer place than when they found it" (Ellis 1, 25). But, like all superhero teams, The Authority falls into the process of defending rather than promoting: The first three storylines succeed one another in the degree of danger that is posed to the Earth, quickly escalating to cosmic proportions—there is clearly no time for earthly political concerns. It isn't until Ellis leaves the title and is replaced by Mark Millar that the storyline becomes overtly political in nature. Issue 13 opens with The Authority dismantling a Southeast Asian political regime, unnamed in the story, in part for its human rights violations and the unwillingness of the US or the UN to intervene. Later in the same issue, then President Bill Clinton makes thinly veiled threats to the leader of The Authority, Jack Hawksmoor, in an attempt to halt the continuing political activism of the

heroes—simply, superheroes should have no ideologies of their own, unless they are conservative ones, upholding the politics of the government they tacitly serve. Outside of the incident in issue 13, *The Authority* has continued to eschew political activism, and has once again succumbed to combating menaces on a monthly basis, more concerned with the continuing existence of humanity than the continuing existence of "hunger, poverty, war, crime, disease, pollution, and oppression." The question then is why? Why continue with the pretensions of utopia when, quite clearly, superheroes, by their very presence, suppose a need for order, not a need for progress? *The Authority* would need to end as a series if utopia were to be achieved, and because it is clearly a product of capitalism, it cannot achieve utopia, for then its franchise evaporates—*The Authority* must always invent a new enemy, simply to divert it from achieving utopia. If utopia were to be achieved, then, quite simply, readers would have to follow another utopia-in-progress, whether it be *The Avengers*, *The X-Men*, or *The Justice League of America*. But then the question becomes: Why do comic book readers long for utopia-in-progress rather than utopia achieved? With such a tradition for experimentation with thematic content, why is it that superhero comics refrain from changing their conservative paradigms? Why is it that the readership allows these modern myths to remain static, barring them from aging and becoming epic? These issues are today at the very heart of the genre. It is unfortunate that the superhero comic is so dramatically limited by the conservative and adolescent readership that it has acquired, one that would sooner choose Rorschach as a sympathetic character than Ozymandias. If superhero comics are to bloom into a mature medium, they must begin to appeal to older, and more intellectually liberal readers, or readers more concerned with utopias achieved rather than utopia lost.

In contrast to Stanley Fish's claims regarding the nature of interpretation, I find that the majority of comic book readers are limited to a specific reading of any given superhero—there is very little room for interpretation given to them by the authors of the text. Rather, to participate in the discourse of superhero comic books is to eschew one's ability to interpret in favor of a conservative reading ideology, in much the same way that a religious text forces its readers to interpret its message; a comic book reader cannot read Superman as a supervillain any more

than the Christian can read Christ as adversary. But Superman's brand of justice can be read as fascistic: There is room for interpreting the text within a spectrum of meaning, much as the Bible can be read to foster an array of Christianities. Because superhero comics are predicated on preserving the status quo, they expect of their readership a conservative reading strategy that translates into desire for conservative narratives—utopia achieved would be a radical narrative, whereas utopia attempted and failed retains the conservative status quo while appeasing the proposed conservative ideology of readers. Hence, in reading *Watchmen*, readers identify with Rorschach and his conservative ideology rather than Ozymandias and his radical act of achieving utopia (or any of the other heroes who eventually side with Ozymandias and his actions). Similarly, Vision must fail in his utopian attempt (no matter how vague the nature of change is), The Authority must face adversaries who distract them from their intention, and the Squadron Supreme must find themselves condemned to local concerns rather than sociopolitical injustice on a global level. In much the same way, readers prefer to retain the hegemonic capitalism that allows them to consume superhero comic books in the face of social injustice. Thus both readers and the characters they popularize spiral into a modality of selfish and truncated desire.

In discussing the Russian revolution, and its claims to utopia, Antonio Gramsci helps to elucidate the nature of the comic book reading interpretive community. Gramsci's clarification of the utopian process is worth quoting at length:

Events [leading to utopia] do not depend on the will of a single individual, nor on that even of a numerous group. They depend on the wills of a great many people, revealed through their doing or not doing certain acts and through their corresponding intellectual attitudes. And they depend on the knowledge a minority possesses concerning those wills, and on the minority's capacity to channel them more or less towards a common aim, after having incorporated them within the powers of the state. (Gramsci 46)

While rather commonsensical, Gramsci helpfully points to the division in desire between the empowered few (those with knowledge) and their audience, especially in the case of comics, which depends on a very specific sort of audience-based economy,[15] and while the writers of the series may have the

best intentions (plotting or ushering in utopia), it ultimately depends upon the readers to enact the utopian impulses of the writers. Because of the conservative nature of the interpretive community that is comic book fandom, these goals are dissipated in the construction of the narrative, as readers demand conservative storylines; thus the Squadron Supreme, The Avengers, Adrian Veidt, and The Authority must fail in their attempts (or be "temporarily" delayed as in the case of The Authority), while the Justice League of America fails to even attempt utopia, favoring instead villains who endanger lives rather than the quality of those lives. While readers grant power to the few editors and writers who determine the content of their monthly comic book purchases, ultimately it is a power constrained by economic concerns, contaminating utopia and imprisoning the readership in a self-imposed, conservative paradigm dependant upon hegemonic capitalism and the position of difference (subculture) that this allows comic book readers.

Refraining from an in-depth analysis of this relationship between the editors and writers of comics and the fans that read them, it is worth noting the particularities of the mediated relationship that at once empowers the readership over their chosen fictional medium and simultaneously limits their actions, as it allows them too much power to exert their conservative ideologies over the subject matter of the narratives. Marshall McLuhan, in his analysis of media, draws attention to the nature of the relationship between the audience and the media which they employ to actualize fantasies—"hot" media deprive the audience of all interpretive ability, imposing, instead, the vision of the narrative's creator (cinema being the prime example); "cold" media allows some interpretive room, empowering the audience in their understanding of the narrative (print, radio); Comics, while remaining a traditionally "cold" medium, become "hot" due to the very nature of their empowerment of readers. Allowing readers to direct the narrative of comics through the constraints of commerce, comic book editors and writers foster a "hot" medium that disallows interpretation due to readers' truncated desires. While comics, much like cinema, allow room for academic interpretation, they fail to foster the sort of narrative interaction that earlier, non-imagistic media grant the audience, not merely in composition, but also in narrative intent and meaning. Thus editors and

writers exist in a state of panopticism, policed by their audience to such a degree that by defying the conservative reading ideologies of their readers, their careers, and their "art" become endangered: The only "art" that can exist in such a relationship is that which is constrained by the censoring attitudes of readers intent on the preservation of their position of cultural difference as a subculture of comic book readers with a discourse all their own.

On some level I find that my claims about comic book readers is overly harsh—by and large, in speaking with comic book readers, I find them to be liberal-minded individuals. The readership consists largely of men, ranging in age from the very young (and one might do well to ask if these are truly readers in the interpretive sense), to the middle-aged. I come to this study as a young man, having spent the greater part of my life reading comics and only the latter years interested in interpreting them against the shared conservative interpretation. My initial forays into polling readers regarding the comic books that they enjoy failed, due, I believe, to my rather radical attempt to reinterpret texts as meaning something other than what is generally considered to be merely escapist literature (if readers consider it to be "literature" at all). Hence, this study grows from what I assume to be a conservative ideology regarding the comic book narrative that readers enjoy, which forbids them from interpreting what they read as anything other than escapist fiction, a conservative ideology extrapolated to include not only the subject matter of the narrative, but the relationship between readers and the very medium which they partake of. This medium, and its discourse, must be preserved to maintain the subculture of comic book fans that most comic book readers find so important to their lives. This "fandom" accepts its position of difference and valorizes it. Thus if the discourse that typifies it were to be corrupted by common knowledge, if the discourse were to alter significantly to allow such things as utopian narratives, then fandom, and its position of difference, would collapse, eradicating difference and solidifying comic book fans as typical citizens within hegemonic capitalism, deprived of their discourse and their difference, maintaining only their conservative ideology, trivialized and commodified within the constraints of hegemony. Thus, only a conservative ideology that maintains comic books as a narrative medium of difference can be allowed to exist within fandom. Hence,

comic book fans trade ''utopian'' narratives for the utopia of a subculture standing against hegemonic capitalism (while still constrained by it due to the very nature of the commercial medium at the heart of its position as a subculture): Again, the world Ozymandias made is no world at all, limited not by his dreams, but by the dreams of comic book fans, their conservative ideology, and their desire to maintain their subcultural position of difference.

Notes

[1]See *Kimota!: The Miracleman Companion*, George Khoury, ed., for the details of Miracleman's history.

[2]Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, 1972.

[3]This relates to Scott McCloud's ideas of space and time and their representation in comic books, explored at some depth in his *Understanding Comics*. He refrains from linking this basic concept to comics on both a micro and macro level, largely being concerned with the former (panel to panel and page to page), rather than the latter (from issue to issue and from series to series) which is largely the realm of DC and Marvel and their expansive universes and mythologies.

[4]See Umberto Eco ''The Myth of Superman,'' *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979, 107-24.

[5]I employ Brian Attebery's demarcation of terminology: ''eutopia'' being ''good place,'' ''utopia'' being rather ambiguous, or good for some, bad for others (i.e., Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*), and ''dystopia'' referring to societies/cultures that are adverse to the majority of people (i.e., George Orwell's *1984*).

[6]The history of Marvel Comics is rather lengthy, and while interesting, far too much for consideration as part of this study. Essential to the understanding of this argument is the basis of numerous Marvel heroes, from throughout its history, as rebels, nuisances, and outsiders. Spider-Man, the X-men, and particularly Namor, are only a few of a great number of characters who stand in opposition, in one way or another, to hegemonic capitalism while simultaneously helping to reinforce the very same power structure.

[7]Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 1980; Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular*

Literature, 1991. Fish's idea is simply that the interpretive discourse is limited by the community that participates in the interpretation, the potential readings of a given text limited by the ideological formation of that community.

[8]Interestingly, the back cover of *Avengers* 253 is an advertisement for the board game Risk, a game about Napoleonic warfare and world domination. A group of high ranking American soldiers are seen seated around the game board, and beneath them is the slogan: "Your armies could conquer the world.... In other words, it's just like the game the big boys play." It is a perfect example of accidental media and the way that it can relate to the text as a whole.

[9]The Squadron Supreme first appeared in *Avengers* 85, February 1971.

[10]Umberto Eco, Postscript to *The Name of the Rose*, 1984.

[11]It is worth noting that the "everyman" character is generally the dissenting voice in these utopian narratives—for The Avengers, it is Captain America, for the Squadron Supreme it is Nighthawk, and in *Watchmen* it is Rorschach—each lacks true superpowers, and makes do in the world of superheroes through their intelligence, and canniness. The will to power is subverting by the lowest common denominator.

[12]Dr. Manhattan's mastery of the atom has led to his world establishing fusion-based engines, which revolutionize transportation, as well as energy systems that alter communication and entertainment. While these aren't explicitly utopian in effect, they do help to purify the environment, both cultural and environmental, and as such are an important first step toward a more balanced culture/ecology.

[13]The details of this are rather convoluted and yet widely known among comic book readers. For a discussion of this and other aspects of *Watchmen*, see *Comic Book Artist* 1. 9 (August 2000), which features an interview with Alan Moore, wherein the issue of Charlton Comics and their superheroes (and their importance to the series) is confronted in some depth.

[14]As expressed in the interview included in Stanley Wiater's *Comic Book Rebels: Conversations with the New Creators* (1993).

[15]Readers regularly write in to comic book editors to air their grievances regarding the status of various elements in the narrative, with the implied threat that if such things are not changed, then the readership will leave the book—the editors, and writers for that matter, defying the wants of the readership for their own selfish end. Series generally succeed or fail based upon their supplying the readers

with what they want, thus series who wantonly eschew the readers' demands are destined to fail (and there is no shortage of series that have succeeded in doing just that).

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