CULTURAL APPROACHES TO SUPERHEROES
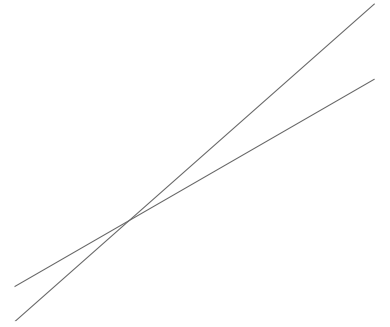
CULTURAL APPROACHES TO SUPERHEROES

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Introduction

The title of this volume – *Cultural Approaches to Superheroes* – draws on a very specific approach to modern superhero studies which should venture beyond a textual-centered research. As Andy Medhurst suggests in the Introduction to *The Superhero Symbol: Media, Culture and Politics*, to view these fantastic, unrealistic figures less as mere entertainment icons and more as a „cultural thermometer, taking the temperature of the times."[1] Certainly, since the very beginning of the modern "superhero culture" the colourful titans in spandex (as presented in comics, cinematic features, TV series or video games) have existed within two codes of reception – as Umberto Eco proposed–being simplistic and aesthetically universal vehicles of stories and hidden manifests of changing times, shifting from "champions of the people" feared by modernism[2] to highly relevant metaphors of cultural, racial or sexual minorities in the guise of orphaned vigilantes, alien refugees or mutated outcasts. By accepting this element of cultural and political usefulness, it would be unfair to reject superhero stories as simplistic fairy tales serving as a realm of intellectual escapism. Instead, it is far more necessary to actually embrace superheroes as one of the most relatable and flourishing aspects of modern culture that grows out from its commercial roots into greatly diverse acts in which individual heroes or their symbols are "used" or "misused" by individual users/creators as a valuable semiotic tools to challenge dominant stereotypes and interpretations.

This volume work contains five chapters that address the aspect of "usefulness" by following distinct paths to uncover the role of superheroes in shaping modern discourses and critical readings. The first article, written by Liam Burke, discusses the highly interesting and largely unknown history of Australian super-men as yet another case of shaping these indigenous

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[1] L. Burke, *Introduction. Everlasting Symbols*, in: L. Burke, I. Gordon, A. Ndalianis (eds.), *The Superhero Symbol: Media, Culture and Politics*, New Brunswick 2019, p. 3.

[2] A.J. Regalado, *Bending Steel: Modernity and the American Superhero*, Jackson 2017.

characters in accordance with their "local" roots and social/political needs. As Burke points out, attempts of the kind bring the fundamental issues in superhero research to the fore, such as the limits of "translation" between American and Australian models or the multilayered convention of composing the image of a superhero by incorporating non-American traces into the basic "American monomyth" structure. The second author, Jeffrey S.J. Kirchoff, covers a different aspect of "using" a specific superhero-centered text in the controversial *Masters of the Universe* film feature directed by Gary Goddard in 1987. Kirchoff demonstrates the latter to be an outstanding example enabling one to discuss fandom/anti-fandom practices of subverting/embracing a specific interpretation of a beloved franchise and its core characters. We can thus find out that the film has inspired deeply involved discussion and performative acts between the fans and anti-fans of Goddard's work, all concerned with the core category of what is a superhero "canon" and who actually may decide what stays within this "canonical" reading and what does not. The subsequent text adopts yet another approach to the act of "using" a distinctive set of (anti)heroes as Jakub Wieczorek examines the portrayal of Marvel supervillains in recent comics as a very interesting and fully conscious process of "humanizing" the classic adversaries. As the author suggests, this creative practice can be seen as a much needed attempt to introduce a confusion of sorts between the readers and the often overly absurd foes of superheroes, who are depicted as ordinary individuals trying to live a modest living. Michał Wolski's analysis of Thunderbolts explores a similar modality, since the author also seeks to provide a detailed elucidation concerning a popular group of Marvel's villains-turned-heroes. By focusing on the theme of "redemption," Wolski argues that by cases like the Thunderbolts make possible to discuss the "superhero chronotope" in the light of "overwriting" its premises to re-establish a superhero narrative. Finally, Michał Siromski provides insights into superhero-related media employed as therapeutic and psychoeducational tools. Siromski, a psychologist himself, looks at superhero comic books as a field for play therapy, narrative therapy and art therapy, revealing the "practical" potential in Batman or Superman-related mythos.

As already observed, *Cultural Approaches to Superheroes* opts for a unique and much needed research perspective to uncover the true potential of modern superhero symbols. I am deeply convinced that this volume shows at least a few analytical fields in which inquiry can be informed by the category of "practicing" or "using" particular heroes and/or hero-dedicated stories. Furthermore, one cannot fail to notice that this collection of essays may primarily be seen as an invitation to re-discover the concept of superhero

character that serves to reflect the constantly-changing image of its "users" under the flashy suits and waving capes, just as they are presented in comic books, films or video games.

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We need another hero: the incompatibility of superheroes and Australia[1]

Australia loves superheroes. In 2018 the three highest grossing films at the Australian box office were superhero movies, Melbourne's Central Business District hosted the interactive exhibition *Avengers S.T.A.T.I.O.N.*, while the city's Docklands Stadium was renamed Marvel Stadium when the Disney subsidiary purchased the naming rights.[2] While the annexation of a major sports ground by a company synonymous with superheroes suggests a new level of pervasiveness, Australia has always demonstrated an interest in costume-clad adventurers. For example, in keeping with wider interest in American popular culture following the Second World War, there was a boom in local superhero comic books with titles such as *Captain Atom*, *The Phantom Knight*, and *The Crimson Comet*. However, as the leading scholar on Australian comics, Kevin Patrick, notes, many of these locally produced superhero comic books attempted to pass themselves off as US imports by affixing "Price In Australia" stickers to covers and ensuring that the heroes had American civilian identities. Describing Australia's Captain Atom, whose alter-ego was FBI agent Larry Lockhart, Patrick explains "to cast the likes of Captain Atom as anything other than American would have tested the credulity of Australian audiences."[3] Despite a ready local audience for superheroes and a tradition of producing superhero stories, Australian creators, on the page and screen, have

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[1] This research was conducted as part of the *Superheroes & Me* project funded by the Australian Research Council.

[2] The three highest grossing films at the Australian box office in 2018 were superhero movies: *Avengers: Infinity War*, *Incredibles 2*, and *Black Panther*.

[3] K. Patrick, *Age of the Atoman: Australian Superhero Comics and Cold War Modernity*, in: L. Burke et al. (eds.), *The Superhero Symbol: Media, Culture, and Politics*, New Brunswick 2019.

rarely attempted to develop super-powered characters who were Australian and/or operated in a local setting. As US singer Tina Turner famously wailed on the soundtrack for Australian dystopian adventure film *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (dir. George Miller & George Ogilvie, 1985): "We Don't Need Another Hero."

This chapter will consider some of the reasons for the seeming incompatibility between Australia and the superhero. Drawing on a hundred interviews with superhero creators and fans at Melbourne comic book conventions the most frequently cited reasons for Australia's superhero drought will be organised and analysed under three inter-related headings: National Identity, Cultural Cringe, and Market Differentiation.[4] Although many of the perceived obstacles to Australian superheroes are no longer relevant (and perhaps never were), the respondent interviews demonstrate how they still have potent purchase in Australian cultural life. This article will also consider how the recent emergence of local superhero writers and artists working for international publishers like Marvel and DC Comics can provide a corrective to outdated depictions of Australia. The analysis will conclude with an examination of how the Australian superhero TV show *Cleverman* surmounts many of the long-standing hurdles to Australian superheroes through a careful integration of superhero conventions and Indigenous mythology, suggesting a future direction for Australian superheroes.

Despite the dearth of Australian superheroes, 80% of the creators and fans interviewed for this study said that they would be eager to see more local superheroes on the page and screen. However, when asked to name existing Australian heroes, many respondents struggled to identify any and those that did tended to point to international examples like the DC Comics villain Captain Boomerang, who had recently been reworked as an antihero in the superhero movie *Suicide Squad* (dir. David Ayer, 2016).[5]

Traditionally, Australian characters in international comics were rare. For example, while the "Batmen of All Nations" team-up from *Detective Comics #215* (January 1955) included Ranger from "Faraway Australia" he only received two lines of dialogue in the issue and was not included when the team

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[4] The interviews for this study were carried out as part of the *Superheroes & Me* research project funded by the Australian Research Council. In 2016, attendees and guests at Melbourne-based comic book conventions, Supanova, Oz Comic-Con, and AMC participated in semi-structured interviews about superheroes and fan culture. Additional interviews were carried out at a preview screening of Cleverman, also in 2016. Unless otherwise indicated, all quoted interviews are from this research.

[5] As this study's interviews were largely conducted before *Cleverman* was broadcast, it is possible that respondents would have cited the character if the research had taken place following the broadcast of the television show's first season.

reappeared in *World's Finest Comics #89* (July 1957). This apathy vanished in the 1980s, which geographer Alyson L. Greiner identifies as the "decade of the 'Australian Invasion.'" Pointing to Outback heroes Mad Max and Crocodile Dundee, Greiner describes how "Representations of Australia in American cinema and broadcast media became much more commonplace."[6] Comic book publishers in the United States and United Kingdom also attempted to take advantage of the unprecedented interest in Australia. For example, in 1988: Batman fought the boomerang-wielding "Aborigine"; the UK's alternative comic book character Tank Girl roamed a post-apocalyptic Australia with her kangaroo boyfriend; and even the X-Men moved their headquarters to the Outback.

There were some local efforts during this time to create Australian superheroes, with the most successful example being *The Southern Squadron* by David de Vries and Glenn Lumsden. The superhero team were first published in the comics anthology *Cyclone!* in 1985 before receiving a dedicated title that was also republished in the US. Cover blurbs introduced the Southern Squadron as "Australia's own superhero trouble shooters!" The irreverent comic played upon distinctly Australian conventions with team members such as the beer-swilling ocker Nightfighter or beast-like Dingo. However, despite wider interest in Australia during the 1980s, there were no sustained attempts to produce superheroes and none of the local examples introduced during this time were identified by this study's respondents, who tended to point to Australian characters created by US publishers.

As stereotypical as international examples might be, with Australian creators unable or unwilling to provide local super-powered heroes, depictions of Australia in superhero stories were provided by overseas creators. As demonstrated by this study's responses, these international examples have also been influential in Australia, even while they perpetuate stereotypes that bear little resemblance to the lives of most Australians. For instance, *Cleverman* creator Ryan Griffen highlighted the little-known Avenger Manifold as an example of an Indigenous Australian hero, but cautioned, "these are superheroes that were created by people outside of Australia and they're just using either stereotypes or what they can quickly Google to help fuel the creation of the characters." Given the local enthusiasm for masked marvels it is important to consider: Why Australia has generally avoided creating native superheroes; How this shortfall has allowed certain stereotypes to go unchallenged; and Where this seeming incompatibility is slowly being resolved.

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[6] A.L. Greiner, *Popular Culture, Place Images, and Myths: The Promotion of Australia on American Television*, "The Journal of Popular Culture" 35(1)/2001, p. 186.

National identity

When asked about Australian superheroes for this project, creator of *The Crow*, American writer-artist James O'Barr, identified costumed crimefighter the Phantom. When it was explained that the Phantom was not actually Australian, but the creation of New Yorker Lee Falk the writer-artist replied, "It's kind of mystifying because he's forgotten about in the US." As Kevin Patrick details in his exhaustive study *The Phantom Unmasked*, although the purple spandex-wearing adventurer was an American creation, the Phantom was adopted by Australia following his introduction in the housekeeping magazine *Australian Woman's Mirror* in 1936.[7] Despite appearing before Superman, the Phantom is not considered the first classical superhero by scholars like Peter Coogan due to the comic's jungle setting.[8] However, as Patrick notes, the "factors that arguably militated against the Phantom's popular acceptance in his American homeland – such as his lack of superpowers, or recognizably American origin or setting – did much to enhance his international appeal." In keeping with wider resistance to American cultural imperialism, Patrick adds "Australians, it seemed, admired the Phantom because they saw him as the very antithesis of the American 'super' hero."[9] Drawing on extensive research with generations of Australian Phantom fans (or "Phans"), Patrick describes how his survey respondents gravitated to the character because he embodied "Australian" values. However, what are the tenets of Australian national identity that seem to resist the classical superhero?

As tourism scholar Sue Beeton notes, since Federation in 1901 Australian culture has often sought to forge a distinct identity by positioning the Australian bush and bushman as a "symbol of nationalism."[10] This tactic served to differentiate Australia from European idylls and urban centres by depicting Australia as a distant and often unforgiving rural landscape thinly populated by a hard-working and humble people. However, in an attempt to forge a distinct national identity, such cultural nationalism has implicitly endorsed colonialist images of Australia. This tradition has continued with many scholars pointing out how despite Australia being one of the most urbanised countries in the

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[7] K. Patrick, *The Phantom Unmasked: America's First Superhero*, Iowa City 2017, p. 68.

[8] Ibidem, p. 182.

[9] K. Patrick, *The Transplanted Superhero: The Phantom Franchise and Australian Popular Culture*, in: R. Denison, R. Mizsei-Ward (eds.), *Superheroes on World Screens*, Mississippi 2016, pp. 21–31.

[10] S. Beeton, *Rural Tourism in Australia – Has the Gaze Altered? Tracking Rural Images through Film and Tourism Promotion*, "International Journal of Tourism Research" 6(3)/2004, p. 126.

world today, local arts and culture often depict the nation as a "blank canvas" free from the restrictions of the modern world.[11]

Created in the depths of the Depression as a response to the challenges of the Machine Age, superheroes are inescapably modern and urban. As Ben Highmore notes of these thoroughly modern marvels, superheroes are a "species that has adjusted to the modern city and overcome its obstacles."[12] Often considered the first classical superhero, Superman demonstrated this Machine Age resilience from his first appearance in *Action Comics #1* (June 1938) in which he hurdled a twenty-story building and outpaced an express train. Scottish comic book writer Grant Morrison argues that, "Like jazz and rock 'n' roll" the superhero is also a "uniquely American creation."[13] Such US origins were part of the superhero's long-standing appeal in Australia, but it has also provoked wider concerns regarding cultural imperialism. For instance, one article published in "The Sydney Morning Herald" on December 28, 1948, *Are 'Comic' Books Harmful to the Minds of Young Readers?*, warned "The language used in many of the comics on sale in Sydney shows an unmistakable United States origin."[14] However, as Kevin Patrick explains many of the superhero comics identified in the article were actually locally produced, albeit with American trappings ("Atoman"). Thus, almost from their inception, star-spangled, city-dwelling superheroes have clashed with the traditions of Australian national identity such as: the Outback, the bushman, and egalitarianism.

Beeton notes how in the pursuit of a distinct national identity near the end of the 19th century, bush poets such as Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson reworked European rural idylls by focusing on the countryside as "a living being to [be] conquered by living in it, not passively enjoyed."[15] Thus, the capacity to live in an inhospitable environment became central to Australian cultural nationalism, with the everyday celebrated as a heroic triumph. Despite the bush/Outback experience being out-of-step with the daily lives of most Australians, it has found an eager audience internationally with Australia often positioned for the "tourist gaze."[16] In his cross-cultural reception study of the

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[11] P. Williams, *Beyond Mad Max III: Race, Empire, and Heroism on Post- Apocalyptic Terrain*, "Science Fiction Studies" 32(2)/2005, p. 301; M. Haltof, *In Quest of Self-Identity: Gallipoli, Mateship, and the Construction of Australian National Identity*, "Journal of Popular Film and Television" 21(1)/1993, p. 29; A.L. Greiner, *Popular Culture…*, p. 186.

[12] B. Highmore, *Cityscapes: Cultural Readings in the Material and Symbolic City*, New York 2005, p. 124.

[13] G. Morrison, *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero*, London 2012, p. 29.

[14] *Are 'Comic' Books Harmful to Minds of Young Readers?*, "Sydney Morning Herald" 28 December 1948, p. 2.

[15] S. Beeton, *Rural Tourism in Australia…*, p. 127.

[16] J. Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*, London 1990, p. 1.

Australian adventure film *Crocodile Dundee* (dir. Peter Faiman, 1986), Stephen Crofts notes how US reviewers described how the film depicted Australia as a "lost frontier" with reviewers speculating that its stateside success owed much to it providing American audiences with a "primal innocence" they felt they had lost.[17] US superhero comic books also participated in this representation of the Australian landscape as a frontier free from the stifling conformity of progress. For example, presaging the casting of Australian actor Hugh Jackman as Canadian character Wolverine in cinema, in *Uncanny X-Men #230* (June 1988) X-Man Rogue comments on her teammate's seeming suitability to the Australian Outback, "Wolvie loves this wilderness. It's as elemental as he is… country where you work to nature's schedule an' rules not some arbitrary man-made timepiece."

Many of this study's respondents echoed this wider perception of Australia. For example, Australian actor Eka Darville (*Jessica Jones*) perpetuated the urban/rural dichotomy, commenting,

> Aussies have a very special connection with nature, because America has been so dominated there's not that kind of [connection to nature]. Every Aussie has grown up with snakes and spiders and all of these kind of threats that make the natural world very real.

Similarly, Australian comic book writer and publisher Darren Koziol explained how the comics he publishes under his company Dark Oz,

> […] contain a lot of Australian themes and characters […] The previous issue I did – the Ozploitation issue – was very popular, we got these American tourists stuck in the Aussie Outback playing up to all your usual stereotypes of everything in Australia wants to kill you.

Koziol later added,

> I actually wrote that story knowing I was going to San Diego Comic-Con, so I specifically aimed and designed it to play up to their ideas of Australia and to really captivate [US readers].

With the proven success of Outback-set Australian stories, there has often been little appetite among local or international creators to move these adventures to the urban environments where superheroes traditionally operate – with no buildings to leap in a single bound, how can a Superman test his mettle in the Outback? Nonetheless, this mythologised terrain does produce heroes of a different order.

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[17] S. Crofts, *Cross-Cultural Reception Studies: Culturally Variant Readings Ofcrocodile Dundee*, "Continuum" 6(1)/1992, p. 161.

Beeton notes how "even though most of today's Australians have little direct relationship with any Australian bushmen," the self-reliant and resourceful rural worker who overcame Australia's unforgiving landscape is still a "symbol of nationalism." She adds that the myth is "analogous to the pervasive legend of the American west and the notion of 'the frontier' in the American psyche."[18] This Western gunslinger is often considered the superhero's immediate antecedent.[19] However, as the Machine Age progressed the cowboy was increasingly out-of-step with contemporary US interests, with Ramzi Fawaz distinguishing the superhero from the Western gunfighter through the superhero's "mutually constitutive relationship to twentieth-century science and technology."[20] Thus, while US and Australian heroic types share frontier origins, US superheroes became modern, urban, and optimistic, while their Australian cousins maintained a rural tradition that prized stoicism, self-reliance, and rough pragmatism. Indeed, many of this study's respondents pointed to bushman descendants Mad Max and Crocodile Dundee when identifying local heroes, but noted that these heroes did not fully align with the classical superhero, with typical responses including, "Australian superheroes would look like [wildlife expert parody] Russell Coight"; "like [wildlife documentarian] Steve Irwin or Crocodile Dundee. [Someone who] uses crocodiles as his power or something like that would be pretty cool," and "Could you imagine someone like Crocodile Dundee being a superhero with a cape?"

Part of the incompatibility between the superhero and the rural "battler" is the bushman's inability to accommodate what Morrison identifies as the "the transcendent element in the Superman equation": The secret identity.[21] Sociologist Karina J. Butera notes of the "toughness, independence and resilience" of Australian masculinity and mateship that "overt displays of vulnerability or emotion are to be avoided."[22] The superhero's transformation from a mild-mannered civilian identity to a paragon of masculinity is widely considered a key convention of the genre and central to the superhero's appeal.[23] While the urban centres of US superhero stories allow these characters to hide out as reporters and playboy billionaires, the unrelenting rural experience of the

[18] S. Beeton, *Rural Tourism in Australia…*, p. 128.

[19] R.C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: an Aesthetic History*, Mississippi 1996, p. 65.

[20] R. Fawaz, *The New Mutants Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*, New York 2016, p. 6.

[21] G. Morrison, *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero*, London 2012, p. 9.

[22] K.J. Butera, *'Neo-Mateship' in the 21st Century: Changes in the Performance of Australian Masculinity*, "Journal of Sociology" 44(3)/2008, p. 269.

[23] U. Eco, *The Myth of Superman*, "Diacritics" 2(1)/1972, p. 15; R. Reynolds, *Super Heroes: a Modern Mythology*, Mississippi 1994, pp. 12–16; P.M. Coogan, *Superhero: the Secret Origin of a Genre*, Austin 2006, pp. 59–60.

bushman and his descendants does not permit such moments of vulnerability. Indeed, drawing comparisons with the anti-hero protagonists of 1950s' revisionist Westerns like *The Searchers* (dir. John Ford, 1956), Rose Lucas describes Mad Max as "a superman who refuses to resume the costume of the ordinary."[24] Indeed, Clark Kent would n't not last five minutes in this mythic Outback.

Although traditional Australian heroic types are at odds with the superhero's vulnerable civilian identity, they also tend to resist the garishness of the costume-clad alter-ego. In his article "An Australian Superman," philosopher Damon Young imagines what might have happened if the infant Superman had landed in the Australian Outback rather than the cornfields of Kansas. Noting the centrality of the image of "tough, simple, hard-working diggers," "the Anzac legend of stoic mateship and silent sacrifice," and the celebration of "egalitarianism" to Australian national identity, Young concludes that his Australian Superman "is more likely to become a cautious provincial survivor than a messianic hero."[25] This democratic spirit still resonates in Australian cultural life and is often demonstrated through "Tall Poppy Syndrome," which journalist Peter Hartcher identifies as an "unspoken national ethos" that "no Australian is permitted to assume that he or she is better than any other Australian. How is this enforced? By the prompt corrective of levelling derision."[26] It is hard to imagine a taller poppy than the spandex-wearing popinjays who leap from the covers of US comics. In Young's Australian Superman the hero never adopts a public heroic identity. Accordingly, he avoids the tall poppy status that is so unpalatable to many Australians, including a number of this study's respondents. As Wonder Woman artist Nicola Scott summarised, "Our superheroes are like Mad Max. When I think of an Australian superhero I don't think of someone wearing spandex – that's a really American image."

Fans and creators interviewed for this study consistently pointed to the tenets of Australian national identity, including the Outback, bushman, and egalitarianism when describing local heroes, with many suggesting that these qualities were at odds with the urban, optimistic, and individualistic superhero. While these qualities were used to forge a distinct Australian national identity, these foundational myths do not align with the experience of many Australians who today live in one of the world's most urbanised countries. That Australian superhero fans struggled to imagine superheroes existing in an Australian context testifies to the hegemonic dominance of this particular

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[24] R. Lucas, *Dragging It out: Tales of Masculinity in Australian Cinema, From Crocodile Dundee to Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, "Journal of Australian Studies" 22(56)/1998, p. 143.

[25] D. Young, *An Australian Superman*, "Island" 137/2014, pp. 29–30.

[26] N. Booker, *Our Colonial Columnist Continues to Deliver His Own Views and Opinions*, "Riddle Magazine" 18 August 2018, riddlemagazine.com/antipodean-adventures/.

brand of national identity. However, the resistance to Australian superheroes also points to a cultural cringe that still seems to haunt much of Australian art and entertainment.

Cultural cringe

The term "cultural cringe" was popularised by Melbourne-born critic and teacher Arthur Phillips to describe the presumed superiority of culture produced overseas (in particular England) compared to local efforts. Writing in 1950, Phillips described "a disease of the Australian mind" which he identifies as "an assumption that the domestic cultural product will be worse than the imported article."[27] Greiner, citing Stephen Alomes, suggests that such cultural cringe gives way to the "peculiarly Australian practice of 'knocking', or constantly criticizing things Australian."[28] Indeed, despite broad enthusiasm for more Australian superheroes, many of this study's respondents ridiculed the possible results: "I can't imagine someone really Australian unless you get someone really bogan," "if they had a super-ocky accent, that would be hilarious," and "there was an Australian Deadpool [in cosplay] before. He had a cork hat, so something like that?"[29]

Kevin Patrick notes of one of the first Australian superhero comics, *Jo and her Magic Cape*, published in 1945,

> [...] the approach, widely emulated by subsequent Australian-drawn superhero comics, was a harbinger of what architect and social commentator Robyn Boyd denounced as the 'culture of Austerica'. Australian society, he argued, was 'mesmerized by the appearance of Americana,' but was only capable of producing an austere, threadbare imitation of American popular culture.[30]

Similarly, many of this study's respondents worried that local efforts could only offer attenuated avengers. Demonstrating the reach of US popular culture, one fan attending Oz Comic-Con dressed as Captain America cautioned

> Australian superheroes? You know what, no, because I think our superpowers would be like throwing drop bears and drinking grog. Unless you wanted a Captain Bogan? No, let's just leave it to the big boys, shall we?[31]

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[27] A. Phillips, *The Cultural Cringe*, "Meanjin" 9(4)/1950, p. 299.

[28] A.L. Greiner, *Popular Culture, Place Images, and Myths: The Promotion of Australia on American Television*, "The Journal of Popular Culture" 35(1)/2001, p. 186.

[29] "Bogan" and "ocker" are Australian slang terms that are often used pejoratively to describe someone who is unsophisticated and/or working class.

[30] K. Patrick, *Age of the Atoman...*, p. 290.

[31] "Drop Bears" are an Australian in-joke about a predatory koala that attacks people who do not have an Australian accent (i.e. tourists). "Grog" is an Australian slang term for alcohol.

Reflecting on the difficulties faced by Australian writers, such as the Jindy-worobak Movement, to forge a unique culture, Phillips describes how when local authors use Australian imagery it "doesn't quite come off" as it heightens our awareness of the writer's process.[32] Similarly, some respondents identified a tension between distinctly Australian elements being added to a character type so firmly associated with the US, "What about the accent? It probably just wouldn't sound right." However, Grant Morrison argues that "superheroes were nothing if not adaptable, and as they grew and multiplied across the comic-book pages of the Free World, they happily took on the flavor of their surroundings."[33] Many fans were eager for superheroes with such a local flavour, "I think an Australian superhero would be just like a normal superhero, but maybe with a bit more of a relaxed attitude." Phillips might have endorsed such a laid-back Australian superhero, as he concluded his analysis of cultural cringe with a call for Australian art to be "unselfconsciously ourselves" adding "the opposite of the Cringe is not the Strut, but a relaxed erectness of carriage."[34]

Market differentiation

Describing the superhero dominance of the US comic book industry in 2000, *Watchmen* artist Dave Gibbons remarked, "superheroes are a genre that has overtaken a medium" ("Comics and Superheroes"). Since then, this superhero dominance has spread to mainstream cinema, television, and video games. However, most entries in the superhero genre still tend to stem from the two big US publishers Marvel and DC Comics, making it difficult for creators from any country to introduce new costumed crimefighters. For example, Dark Oz publisher Darren Koziol who mainly publishes horror and science fiction titles suggested, "I don't think we get too many Australian superheroes because the market is already dominated by all your Marvel and DC superheroes." This sentiment was shared by Wolfgang Bylsma, the Editor-In-Chief of Australia's leading graphic novel publisher, Gestalt: "If you look at Marvel and DC, which most people describe as the 'big two,' that's where the majority of people buy their superhero comics from [...] there's just too much of it to really make enough noise with new titles." Thus, a pragmatic need for differentiation in an international and domestic market already clogged with costume-clad characters has also contributed to the dearth of locally-produced Australian heroes. Although the 100 creators and fans interviewed for this study have helped

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[32] A. Phillips, *The Cultural Cringe*, p. 299.
[33] G. Morrison, *Supergods...*, p. 29.
[34] A. Phillips, *The Cultural Cringe*, p. 302.

articulate the existing reasons for Australia's seeming incompatibility with the superhero, they also hint at how these hurdles might be surmounted, if not quite in a "single bound."

From bushman to *Cleverman*

There have been consistent attempts to challenge the dominance of US super-heroes in Australia. Kevin Patrick notes how in the 1960s the first organised Australian comic book fan communities were raised "on local editions of over-seas comics, as well as indigenous publications" and celebrated local achieve-ment through fanzines like *Down Under*, whose editor, John Ryan, dismissed readers with a "single-minded devotion to Marvel Comics" as "fanatics."[35] Cos-players have also sought to recover Australian characters created by inter-national writers and artists. For instance, a 2017 exhibition at the Melbourne Museum, *Marramb-ik*, focused on Aboriginal superheroes created by and for Aboriginal people. It featured the work of Indigenous cosplayer Cienan Muir who attends comic book conventions dressed as the DC Comics villain Cap-tain Boomerang – a white Australian character who uses the Indigenous Aus-tralian tool to super-powered effect. Such cosplay reclaims the stereotypical Australian character, and as the museum notes explained, "Cienan believes the very act of cosplay shows that a person can dismantle the concept of shame, suspend judgement and eliminate intimidation."

While acknowledging that some Australian superheroes have appeared in international comics, *Cleverman* star Hunter-Page Lochard argued that "I think what's important now is that these characters start being created by Australian people." Traditionally, "all of American comics were created by a couple hundred people in the New York metro area."[36] In recent years digi-tal technologies have enabled international creators to shape these US icons, with Australians Tom Taylor, Nicola Scott, and David Yardin, who were inter-viewed for this study, working on high-profile US comics including X-Men, Wonder Woman, and Black Panther. Writer Tom Taylor argues that "there aren't enough Australian superheroes and there definitely should be more," and has based some of his US comics in Australia. For instance, in one Mel-bourne-set *Injustice: Gods Among Us* story (April 2013), a local superhero at-tempts to assert Australian sovereignty in the face of a now villainous Super-man, but his powers are revealed to be a dull imitation of the Man of Steel and he is quickly overpowered. This could be read as a metaphor for how US

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[35] K. Patrick, *(FAN) Scholars and Superheroes: The Role and Status of Comics Fandom Re-search in Australian Media History*, "Media International Australia" 155(1)/2015, p. 31.

[36] R. Duncan, M.J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture*, London 2013, p. ix.

superhero comics dominate Australia, but it also points to the subtle influence Australian creators are now able to cast over an increasingly global comic book industry. Taylor's Superman does not touch down in an ersatz Outback, but an accurate depiction of urban Australia, with details specific to the writer's Melbourne. The success of these Australian creators helps to dismantle the stereotypes of an outdated national identity, while the endorsement of US publishers Marvel and DC Comics combats cultural cringe. Nonetheless, these are still US comics, but in 2016 local creators offered a significant contribution to the superhero pantheon that was unambiguously Australian: Cleverman.

Cleverman was created by Indigenous writer Ryan Griffen, who, when interviewed for this research, described how following an afternoon playing Batman with his son he wanted to create something that his child "could connect to on a cultural basis [...] an Aboriginal superhero." The eventual television show, *Cleverman*, was first broadcast in 2016, and imagines an X-Men-like near future Australia in which mythological "Hairypeople" have re-emerged to take their place alongside humans. However, coexistence is not easy, with government agencies unwilling to recognise the Hairypeople (or "Hairies") as citizens and limiting their movements to a heavily-policed "Zone." Drawn into this conflict is Koen West, a reluctant superhero who has recently become the Cleverman, a conduit for Australia's First Nations people to the Dreaming.[37] With a largely Indigenous Australian cast and crew, *Cleverman* successfully negotiates many of the perceived obstacles to Australian superheroes.

In keeping with superhero conventions, *Cleverman* is largely set in a generic cityscape (recognisably Sydney to locals), but it maintains a connection to native traditions. As creator Griffen explains

> We've used our culture, the Aboriginal culture, in different ways: To give one of our characters a story arc, [...] to create the creatures in our world, and we also used it for just opening up the spectrum of political issues.

However, superhero genre conventions do not always align with cultural sensitivities, with Griffen describing how in developing the show "you'll hear a story beat that is amazing in the genre world and you really want to do it, but I'll be sitting in the room and I'll put my hand up and go, 'Well, we can't do that because of the cultural sensitivity [...].' And so you then need to figure out a way to create that story and adhere to the culture, but also what people expect out of genre." Through a commitment to First Nations peoples and their culture, *Cleverman* does not offer the pale imitation of US superheroes that so

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[37] The Dreaming is a central aspect of Aboriginal Australian spiritual beliefs. In Dreamtime, all life is part of a larger network that can be traced back to the great sprit ancestors of the Dreamtime.

many of this study's respondents feared, but rather it adapts the superhero to a local context.

Cleverman also avoids the cultural cringe that burdens much of Australian output, as it comes with tacit international approval: among the show's production partners is the US cable channel Sundance TV, the creature effects were provided by the Oscar-winning Weta Workshop, and the cast includes recognisable international actors such as *Game of Thrones* star Iain Glen. However, the show is not merely reflective of growing Australian confidence, but is active in contributing to that confidence. For instance, when interviewed for this study prior to the show's premiere, actor Adam Briggs described how "growing up the only Indigenous superhero that I knew of was Bishop from X-Men," but Briggs believed that a superhero show like *Cleverman* demonstrated a greater "confidence," adding "things like this are only going to spark ideas and have kids writing their own stories, and finally putting themselves in these roles of being leaders." This confidence was evident when star Hunter Page-Lochard attended the Melbourne comic convention AMC following the show's well-received first season. The actor described how, "to be at a Con where I'm sitting next to [*Wolverine* comic book writer] Larry Hama and there's a Disney princess walking past me [voice actress Linda Larkin] and I've got a Cyborg (*Justice League* actor Ray Fisher) next door, it's like whoa, this is awesome. But the thing that's most awesome about it is little small me from Australia deserves to be here as much as they do."

In his essay *The Cultural Cringe*, Arthur Phillips identifies a lack of distinct cultural traditions in Australia for prompting unfavourable comparisons between local artistic works and those produced overseas,

> We cannot shelter from invidious comparisons behind the barrier of a separate language; we have no long-established or interestingly different cultural tradition to give security and distinction to its interpreters.[38]

However, *Cleverman* makes use of Indigenous Australian culture to serve as a point of differentiation, with creator Ryan Griffen explaining:

> These are 60,000-year-old stories that have never been told in this sort of realm and that is what makes us unique, and that is what broadcasters around the world are looking for, something new, something different.

Thus, the use of local mythology not only provides the show's creators with confidence, but also much-needed distinction in a crowded marketplace. For example, Gestalt editor-in-chief Wolfgang Bylsma was interviewed for this project in 2016. At that point Gestalt was primarily focused on horror and

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[38] A. Phillips, *The Cultural Cringe*, p. 299.

science fiction books. Bylsma believed that the comic market was saturated by superheroes, explaining

> It feels like there's enough to go around already. But who knows? I mean, somebody might surprise you with something that absolutely knocks it out of the park.

In 2017 Gestalt not only published the *Cleverman* tie-in comic book, but Bylsma co-wrote the comic with series creator Ryan Griffen. Seemingly, the use of Indigenous Australian mythology was enough to rejuvenate the tired superhero genre, and provide the necessary market differentiation for a local superhero.

Through a deft mix of Indigenous mythology and superhero conventions *Cleverman* demonstrates it is possible to reconcile those tensions – national identity, cultural cringe, and market differentiation – that once kept Australia and the superhero apart, demonstrating that despite Tina Turner's protests: We **Do** Need Another Hero.

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Postscript: This article was originally published in *Senses of Cinema* issue 89 (December 2018). Since that publication, Australian comic book writer Tom Taylor, who was interviewed for this study, has added another Australian superhero to the comic book pantheon: Thylacine. Thylacine is an Indigenous Australian superhero whose stealth powers are inspired by the large carnivorous marsupial Thylacine, also known as the Tasmanian Tiger or Tasmanian Wolf. Taylor consulted with *Cleverman* creator Ryan Griffen and Aboriginal actress Shari Sebbens in developing the character, who first appeared in *Suicide Squad # 1* (February 2020) published by DC Comics. Thylacine continues the strategy Griffen and his collaborators employed on Cleverman, reconciling the longstanding tensions between Australia and the superhero archetype through a use of Indigenous traditions. Furthermore, Taylor used his status as a writer on US superhero comics to challenge long-standing Australian stereotypes. As the creator explained of Thylacine and her first story arc in which she hunts Captain Boomerang across Australia,

> It's very Australian. It's a way for people here in Australia to see people who aren't tropes – who aren't throwing another shrimp on the barbie or who aren't in Crocodile Dundee world. To show the rest of the world real Australians is really important so for that reason it would be great if Thylacine had a long future at the company.[39]

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[39] M. Kembrey, *Suicide Squad Enlists First Indigenous Australian Character, Thylacine*, "The Sydney Morning Herald" 14 April 2020.

Although *Cleverman* never received a third season, its influence continues past the life of the television show. Indeed, Australia may finally have found its heroes.

Summary

Born in the depths of the Great Depression as a four-colour response to the challenges of the Machine Age, the comic book superhero was a uniquely American creation. While US superheroes on the page and screen are popular in Australia, local creators have avoided producing their own superheroes in favour of more grounded icons like Mad Max. This chapter will consider the reasons for the seeming incompatibility between Australia and the superhero.Drawing on interviews with superhero creators and fans, the most frequently cited reasons for Australia's superhero drought will be organised and analysed under three inter-related headings: National Identity, Cultural Cringe, and Market Differentiation. This chapter will also consider how the recent emergence of local superhero writers and artists working for international publishers like Marvel and DC Comics can provide a corrective to outdated depictions of Australia. The analysis will conclude with an examination of how the Australian superhero TV show *Cleverman* surmounts many of the long-standing hurdles to Australian superheroes through a careful integration of superhero conventions and Indigenous mythology, suggesting a future direction for Australian superheroes.

Keywords: Australia, superheros, indigenous Australians, Cleverman, national identity, cultural cringe

Słowa kluczowe: Australia, superbohaterowie, rdzenni mieszkańcy Australii, Cleverman, tożsamość narodowa, kulturowy cringe

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Rethinking cult film
through Masters of the Universe fandom

After the 1987 release of the Gary Goddard-directed live action film *Masters of the Universe*,[1] Walter Goodman, reviewer for "The New York Times" declared "If you liked the toy, you'll love the movie."[2] Certainly, that is what Mattel, the distributor and creator of the immensely popular action figure line He-Man and the Masters of the Universe™ was counting on. Released in 1982, the He-Man action figure line earned over 70 million dollars in its first year and became so popular so fast that Mattel released a Filmation cartoon of He-Man in 1983. Roger Sweet, arguably one of the co-creators of He-Man, describes how in He-Man's first five years, anything he touched turned to sales gold. From backpacks to toothbrushes, He-Man was everywhere.[3] Why would the movie not be popular? However, an odd thing happened. The movie tanked at the box office (earning 17.3 million dollars against a budget of 22 million dollars), receiving bad reviews from just about every newspaper and movie critic. Some reviewers, including the aforementioned Goodman, thought that only the most obsessed fans would enjoy the film. However, He-Man fans also rejected Goddard's film, feeling it betrays the mythology established through the cartoon and mini-comics and thus is unrecognizable as a piece of Masters of the Universe intellectual property. Discussion boards on he-man.org and hemanworld.com, two of the livelier Masters of the Universe fan sites, con-

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[1] *Masters of the Universe*, dir. Gary Goddard, perf. Dolph Lundgren, Frank Langella, 1987, Warner Home Video, 2009 (DVD).

[2] W. Goodman, *Film: He-Man Seeks Key*, "New York Times" 8 August 1987, p. 50, Lexis-Nexis [5.07.2020].

[3] R. Sweet, D. Wecker, *Mastering the Universe: He-Man® and the Rise and Fall of Billion-Dollar Idea*, Cincinnati 2005, p. 16.

tinually lambaste the film while also engaging in a hopeful discussion regarding the (many) rumors of a new live action movie adaptation of Masters of the Universe and debate whether it will be able to successfully erase the bad memory of the 1987 "atrocity."

Thus, it might seem surprising that *Masters of the Universe* has graced a surprising number of "Classic Cult Films" lists, including making an appearance on "Variety Magazine"s "Top 100 Cult Films" of all time. While the concept of cult has come under some scrutiny by academics over the last two decades, many leading scholars have determined cult can be a useful gateway into studying audience reception and fan activity. Susan Hayward argues that while there can be two kinds of cult films – including films that initially fail but have enough of a following that it does not disappear from the collective conscious of society and films that experimentally challenge mainstream cinema – there are markers that a film needs to be considered cult: (1) failure at the box office and, more importantly to this study, (2) a devoted audience of any size that intensely applauds the film.[4] Similarly, Patrick T. Kinkade and Michael A. Katovich suggest that cult films are "celebrated as sacred texts by audiences"[5] while Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell similarly position cult as "a term denoting an eclectic group of films defined post hoc in terms of their consumption by dedicated and devoted groups of filmgoers who engage in repeat viewing, celebratory enthusiasm, and performative interaction."[6] Thus, for these scholars, a film signified as being cult is a clue that there is a passionate fanbase that actively engages with the film object; put differently, cult is a way to describe fan behavior as opposed to isolating certain textual features that make a film "cult." Additionally, and most importantly, cult seems to be associated with a *celebration* of a text; ergo, many cult scholars are interested in the ritualized celebrations of fans and what about the film has inspired said celebrations. One might even argue that it is the film's fans that keep the film alive and relevant (at least for a small subsection of society). While a fan's celebration of a text could stem from a myriad of reasons (ranging from coy intertextual references to its aesthetic choices), scholars seem (mostly) in agreement that cult signifies some kind of adoration on the part of a fan.

This understanding of cult would seemingly restrict Goddard's *Masters of the Universe* from being viewed through this lens, as fans have been resistant towards embracing it and most outright reject the text and dismiss it as being part of the Masters of the Universe canon. However, I believe that the afore-

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[4] S. Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, London 2018, p. 95.

[5] P.T. Kinkade, M.A. Katovich, *Toward a Sociology of Cult Films: Reading Rocky Horror*, "The Sociological Quarterly" 33(2)/1992, p. 191.

[6] A. Kuhn, G. Westwell, *A Dictionary of Film Studies*, Oxford 2012, p. 105.

mentioned notion of performative interaction being conducted in "celebratory enthusiasm" is a limiting way to consider fan interaction with texts; that is, I think it is important to recognize how performative interaction can spring from anti-fandom just as much as fandom – and that this anti-fandom can lead to repeated viewings and ongoing, intense conversations that *criticizes*, rather than *lauds*, a film. As such, even though this film is not considered canon by fans and is, for all intents and purposes, ostracized by the He-Man fan community, I posit this film can still be considered "cult" because of its strong, persistent *anti-fan* base. While this fan base may not celebrate the film conventionally, it does inspire performative interactions through both lively discussion on fan-sites and the creation of remixed fan-texts designed to re-claim the film as "canon" and thus an acceptable part of the He-Man mythos. Through this new understanding of the kind of performative interactions in-spired by cult films, this chapter argues that despite the fans' rejection of the live action adaptation, *Masters of the Universe* (1987) remains important to the He-Man fan community as both a litmus test for what does and does define the fictional world of MOTU and for the wealth of new fan-created texts it has inspired. This chapter, then, not only expands our understanding of cult, but shows how anti-fandom can be just as powerful a facilitator of fan productiv-ity as fandom, which can expand 21st century fan studies in productive ways.

Briefly exploring Eternia: a short history of Masters of the Universe

Released in 1982 by Mattel, He-Man and the Masters of the Universe started as an action figure toy-line; the original action figures came with mini-com-ics that provided some short, fun stories while also giving kids some context about the characters. The basic premise is He-Man and the heroic warriors are engaged in an ongoing battle against the evil-sorcerer Skeletor; the warriors (the Masters of the Universe) also tangle with Hordak and his "Evil Horde" from time-to-time. The adventures take place on Eternia – a land that em-braces tropes from both science fiction and fantasy (specifically the "swords and sandals" theme). The action figures themselves are five and a half inches tall, have swivel waists, arms that have only one point of articulation (at the shoulder) and legs that are connected by a thick rubber-band. The toy-line was rather successful in its first year (as previously mentioned, it garnered over 70 million dollars during its first year); given the toy-line's success, it is not surprising that in 1983, Mattel and Filmation released a cartoon show based on the toy. The cartoon, like the toy, found immediate success. Despite its popularity, after 65 episodes, the show was not renewed.

Even though the cartoon was cancelled, Mattel continued releasing action figures; in 1986, the domestic sales of He-Man and the Masters of the Universe line was 400 million dollars.[7] In an effort to further capitalize on the popularity of the toy, Mattel gave its blessing on a live-action film starring Dolph Lundgren as He-Man and Frank Langella as Skeletor. As previously mentioned, the film did not enjoy success at the box-office and was critically panned. Whether a coincidence or not, following the release of the live-action film, sales of the action figure plummeted to seven million dollars and 1987 marked the abrupt end of the original He-Man toy-line.[8]

Mattel didn't not give up on He-Man, though. In 1989, they launched *The New Adventures of He-Man*, a cartoon that moves He-Man away from Eternia and onto the planet Primus. The show lasted 65 episodes – the same length as the original Filmation series – but perhaps because the new show featured few of the original characters, fans of the original TV show never really got into the 1989 series. More recently, Mattel and Cartoon Network teamed up in 2002 to re-launch He-Man. Though popular among fans of the original Filmation cartoon, it failed to capture the imagination of kids – its targeted audience – and lasted only two short years. Fans are now eagerly awaiting the release of two separate Netflix He-Man shows: the Kevin Smith directed *Masters of the Universe: Revelation* and a separate initiative entitled *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe.*

Aside from TV shows, He-Man has also been featured in a few comic book series. DC Comics launched a three issue He-Man mini-series in 1982/83; Star Comics, a Marvel offshoot, released 13 issues of Masters of the Universe in 1986/87; and to accompany the re-launch of He-Man in 2002, Image Comics produced 18 issues that ran through 2004. DC continues to release comics based on He-Man as well, having just concluded a popular *He-Man and the Masters of the Multiverse*. DC also released a monthly comic over 2012–2017, as well as releasing a cross-over series based on the popular videogame *Injustice: Gods Among Us.*

Additionally, there have been on-going rumors of a new live-action film to be released; however, these rumors first began surfacing in 2002, and several directors – from John Woo to *Kung Fu Panda* director John Stevenson – have been attached to the project leading some fans to wonder if a film will ever come to fruition (the latest rumor has attached actor Noah Centineo to play the titular character). Lastly, in the last fifteen years, Mattel introduced the popular "Masters Classics" toy-line; this line re-releases the original figures

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[7] R. Sweet, D. Wecker, *Mastering the Universe…*, p. 141.
[8] Ibidem.

from the 1980s, but "modernize" them by giving them more points of articulation. They are typically sold for thirty dollars an action figure. Despite gaps in the production of He-Man related merchandise and media, fans of the original He-Man remain an active group. They meet annually at the San Diego Comic Con to discuss rumors, they have organized their own convention (Power Con), they participate in a variety of fan boards, and mostly, they try to keep the original series alive through discussions, fan creations, and archiving of classic texts.

Fan rejection of *Masters of the Universe* (1987)

John Fiske writes, "Fans discriminate fiercely: the boundaries between what falls within their fandom and what does not are sharply drawn."[9] Put differently, not every text associated with a particular fandom is embraced or even acknowledged. Part of this discrimination involves fans' creation of a textual hierarchy – canonizing some texts and excluding others.[10] Here, it is important to note that the process for determining canon is extremely subjective. Some scholars have attempted to broadly identify elements that fan communities utilize for the canonization process.[11] For example, Fiske suggests the criteria used to discern canon is related to (perceived) authenticity of an object (usually determined by who is producing or releasing the text) or, similarly, the accumulated capital that a particular creator, author, or artist has in a particular fan community.[12] A way we might understand this example is by examining the Batman fan community where creators Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams have accumulated a significant amount of capital; thus Fiske might argue that their works are "canon." Keidra Chaney and Raizel Liebler offer slightly different criteria they believe fans utilize for crafting a canon, noting that the quality of storyline and character consistency can often come under scrutiny

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[9] J. Fiske, *The Cultural Economy of Fandom*, in: E. Mathijs, X. Mendik (eds.), *The Cult Film Reader*, Maidenhead 2009, p. 448.

[10] Ibidem, p. 449.

[11] There is some debate as to who determines canon. For instance, Jessica Seymour asserts that anything "official" is canon and that fan created canons, which can sometimes include "unofficial" texts such as fan-fiction and fan-remixes, are "fanon." See: J. Seymour, *Racebending and Prosumer Fanart Practices in Harry Potter Fandom*, in: P. Booth (ed.), *A Companion to Fandom and Fan Studies*, New Jersey 2018, pp. 333–348. This chapter does not make such a distinction, as I ascribe to Keidra Chaney and Raizel Liebler's (*Canon vs Fanon: Folksonomies of Fan Culture*, "Media in Transitions" 5/2007) and John C. Lyden's (*Whose Film is it Anyway? Canonicity and Authority in Star Wars Fandom*, "Journal of the American Academy of Religion" 80(3)/2012, pp. 775–786) belief that fan communities create canons.

[12] J. Fiske, *The Cultural Economy...*, p. 449.

when determining whether a text falls under canon or not.[13] Undergirding
these criteria is the belief that well-written stories and stories that fall in-line
with previous "canonized" texts have a better opportunity of being accepted
by various fan communities. We can see this come to fruition in the Superman
fan community, as Superman fans struggled with canonizing Zach Snyder's
Man of Steel because Superman's actions in the film – primarily the killing of
General Zod – are not consistent with other (canonized) storylines and past
interpretations of Superman (primarily violating the rule that Superman does
not kill under any circumstance).

Regardless of how fans craft a canon or textual hierarchy, Lesley Goodman
argues that canons and hierarchies are collaboratively determined by fan com-
munities and as such, based on a collective, interpretive process.[14] Thus, while
there may not be universal agreement within a fan community regarding texts
perceived as canon, there are prevailing or leading ideas regarding the texts
that do and do not fit within a canon. Moreover, following this line of thought,
canon is only determined through (extensive) conversation and debate. I ap-
preciate Goodman's attention to this collaborative process, and I think it un-
derscores the idea that the process for creating these textual hierarchies are
contingent on a particular fan community's taste. Thus, a He-Man fan's pro-
cess for determining canon within the He-Man fan community could be vastly
different than the process or processes *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* fans use.

Because canon criteria are created through a collaborative process deter-
mined only through intense conversation and deliberation, it seems likely the
immediacy and accessibility afforded by digital communication and platforms
has accelerated the creation of canons and the texts there within. As Heidi
Campbell puts it, the internet is the perfect sphere to negotiate and renegoti-
ate canons,[15] while John C. Lyden notes that

> […] texts are shifting realities, negotiated by multiple parties who interact
> with the medium, contributing their own interpretation and evaluation of the
> text as part of its revision.[16]

Thus, the studying of fan sites encouraging and facilitating fan interac-
tion (usually through discussion boards and/or wikis) can be an excellent way
to learn how a particular fan community creates and determines canonical

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[13] K. Chaney, R. Liebler, *Canon vs Fanon…*, p. 3.

[14] L. Goodman, *Disappointing Fans: Fandom, Fictional Theory and the Death of the Author*,
"The Journal of Popular Culture" 28(4)/2015, p. 668.

[15] H. Campbell, *Understanding the Relationship Between Religion Online and Offline in a
Networked Society*, "Journal of the American Academy of Religion" 80(1)/2012, p. 74.

[16] J.C. Lyden, *Whose Film is it Anyway?…*, p. 780.

texts. For instance, in Sarah Schaefer Walton's excellent piece *The Leaky Canon: Constructing and Policing Heteronormativity in the Harry Potter Fandom*, (which explores some of the toxicity and hostility that exists on fan websites) she notes that the Harry Potter community relies heavily on two fan websites to determine what is and is not canon.[17] Put differently – and to hearken back to Fiske – fan websites are wonderful resources to learn how fans "discriminate fiercely" when drawing the lines for what is and is not considered an official part of their fandom.

As such, my analysis of He-Man fans emerges from studying two He-Man and the Masters of the Universe websites. The first is he-man.org, considered to be the oldest He-Man fan site.[18] This website offers objective, detailed overviews of the toys, cartoons, comics, and live-action film and an encyclopedia for all things He-Man. However, as the tag of the website indicates ("The Fan Site Where You Have the Power!"), this website is really all about fan interaction, creativity, and productivity. As such, there is a robust community section of the website where fans can submit fan art, custom creations, fan fiction, share memories, and share collections. Finally – and most importantly for this study – there is a robust fan forum with thirteen different sections fans can create threads in, ranging from "Masters of the Universe Classics Forum" to "Cosplay, Custom Figure, and Sculpture Form." To conduct my analysis of this site and fan commentary, I engaged in two primary modes of mining posts. First, I examined posts crafted under the heading "Vintage He-Man and She-Ra Forum," as the description indicates that includes discussions ranging from the original MOTU toy lines and Filmation cartoons to the 1987 live action movie. From there, I looked for any thread with a subject related to any aspect of the live action film and coded the responses I read. However, because I know that such a search will inevitably not capture all, or even most, of the discussions surrounding the film, I also used the site's custom Google search to locate additional threads regarding this film. I used elements and aspects of the adaptation as search terms, including "Goddard," "1987 live action film," "Gwildor," "Dolph Lundgren," and "Frank Langella."

Posts made on he-man.org demonstrate the most vitriol towards the live action film, and the fan angst is rooted in how the film fails to capture the spirit of both the Filmation cartoon and the toy.[19] KingRandorFacepalm writes

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[17] S. Schaefer Walton, *The Leaky Canon: Constructing and Policing Heteronormativity in the Harry Potter Fandom*, "Participations" 15(1)/2018, p. 232.

[18] he-man.org [5.07.2020].

[19] Of course, this sets up a scenario in which the loudest voice can "win the day," and as mentioned Schaefer Walton's piece and Victoria M. Gonzalez's piece exploring *Once Upon a Time* fandom highlight the inherent problems rooted in fan sites.

> It [the live action film] was awful […] I grew up on the vintage toys and Fil-
> mation and still can't get enough of them […] but I couldn't fit the 1987 movie
> into all of this.

Here, we quickly see how the toys and the Filmation cartoon are posi-
tioned at the top of the He-Man hierarchy and that the live action adaptation
is being compared to it. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that at the time of
the adaptation, there were not as many Masters of the Universe texts to com-
pare to. TPI elaborates on KingRandorFacepalm's concerns by writing

> The movie was nothing like the cartoon. That was the problem. I think for
> most of us, we wanted to see the movie resemble the cartoon at least a little
> bit […]. It was a total disconnect from what we had become accustomed to.
> No Snake Mountain, no Royal Palace – nothing.

Here, we begin to see a more concrete, specific concern arise: there are
certain markers that have come to define He-Man, and they are missing in
the live action adaptation. More to the point, we get our second reference
to the cartoon being the hallowed text – the alpha text, so to speak. While
the toy is mentioned briefly by KingRandorFacepalm, it becomes clear that
the cartoon is placed even higher on the hierarchy than the original toy and
its accompanying minicomics. To that end, Grayskull fury also positions the
Filmation cartoon as the alpha text, noting that "I remember being very, very
disappointed. I remember I asked my mom if we [sic] were in the right theater.
It looked nothing like the cartoon!" This admission reveals that Grayskull fury
could not see any connections between the alpha text and the live action film
and that this is problematic for this particular He-Man fan. For good measure,
let's turn to jzguitars, who writes "That movie was horrible IMO‼ It didn't
have anything to do with the series!" Eamon echoes this concern, asserting

> Aside from all the obvious stuff like budget and lack of familiarity, Goddard
> made the fatal mistake of making the earth bound [sic] characters Julie and
> Kevin the stars instead of the title characters. This is unforgivable in my eyes.
> What was he thinking!

Again, because the plot of *Masters of the Universe* does not relate to the
Filmation cartoon – and as such, fails to account for several key aspects of the
He-Man mythos found in the cartoon – fans feel the live-action film betrays
the alpha texts and thus is not considered canon.

Interestingly, there is a wide contingent of He-Man fans trying to sepa-
rate the film from the object of its fandom, a move that recognizes how far
removed Goddard's adaptation is from the alpha text of the cartoon. We can
see this in posts from contributors such as Dave-Man, who writes,

> As long as your inner child is able to put aside memories of Filmation and let the movie exist as its own continuity, it is fine. I liked it, especially Langella's Skeletor. But it is not like Filmation [...] It is its own interpretation.

JoeyCruel agrees that the film is best viewed through a lens that does not compare the cartoon and the adaptation, writing that if "you are a MOTU fan, you expect somethin' like Filmation and you'll hate it." Thus, He-Man fans are advised to take Lich Leech's advice: "You have to go into it expecting it to be kind of a side step from typical MOTU fare." This will allow you to, as Stampede asserts, "Just enjoy it and appreciate the vision they were trying to achieve." I think here it is of note that efforts to reclaim this film as worthwhile make argue that its worth lies in it *not* being tethered to the He-Man mythos; put differently, the film lacks fan capital due to its issues of fidelity in the translation, but if viewed as something outside of the mythos, there may be some value in the film.

The sentiments shared by He-Man fans on the fan forums embody what Christine Sprengler calls the nostalgic experience and the nostalgic object. The nostalgic experience is the "longing for an irretrievable ideal" and the nostalgic object is "what one is nostalgic for."[20] In this case, fans are longing for a return to the style and characterization found in the He-Man cartoon; the longing is communally experienced on fan forums using the early 80s cartoon as the nostalgic object. He-Man fans wax nostalgic for the Filmation cartoon – yet they know no live action film can actually capture that feeling. Thus, they wax nostalgic some more. The rejection of tradition increases the feelings of nostalgia for the good old days and fosters the discontent over outsiders who get the tradition wrong. Thus, the hierarchy is based on nostalgic value – creations that embrace the original, alpha-text (the text fans are nostalgic about) are placed high on the hierarchy (such as the successful He-Man classics toy-line) while other texts that "re-interpret" and ignore canonical texts are placed low on the hierarchy (live action film).

Re-thinking cult: anti-fandom and cult films

Clearly, the fans of He-Man were – and are – disappointed in the live-action *Masters of the Universe*. The fans' relationship with this particular text can be explained, perhaps, by Henry Jenkins. Jenkins asserts that

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[20] Ch. Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia*, New York 2009, p. 2.

> The fans' response [to a text] typically involves not simply fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism, and it is the combination of the two responses which motivates their active engagement with the media.[21]

Moreover, and perhaps more pertinent to this study, Jenkins posits

> Because popular narratives often fail to satisfy, fans must struggle with them, to try to articulate to themselves and others unrealized possibilities within the original works.[22]

Here, Jenkins posits that fan's disappointment is often assuaged by poaching the original work; that is, fans create new texts that fill holes, re-write the original text, or in general, seeks to improve the original text to fulfill their (and other fans') desire.

Interestingly, fans of He-Man have done just that. Not only are there forums explicitly for fan creations – fan art, fan fiction, fan media, and fan sculptures – but other forums (particularly those that discuss the live action movie) include links to fan creations or simply embed the fan creation in the post (this is most often done with fan media clips on YouTube or fan sculptures).

One of the more popular activities amongst fans is trying to remix the live-action film to make it a part of the He-Man canon and hierarchy – that is, improve the live film adaptation. This is, perhaps, unsurprising, as Will Brooker says fan material can "suggest new directions" or "build on or knock down the framework imposed from [the original texts]."[23] In this case, He-Man fans are trying to offer new possibilities for a live-action film by knocking down what was already existing. For example, the poster Gwildor shared a fan-made trailer for *Masters of the Universe*, writing underneath the YouTube clip "this shows what could have been." The emphasis on this trailer is on the few recognizable characters that appear in both He-Man cartoon and the live action movie, such as He-Man, Skeletor, Teela, and Man-at-Arms, and recognizable locations from the show, such as Eternia and Castle Grayskull. The Earth storylines – which make up over half of the live-action adaptation – are removed from the trailer entirely. Several fans on the forum proceeded to praise the trailer, offering short comments ranging from He-Man or Hordak smiley faces to short one-liners of "this makes it look like a movie worth watching." Another example are the custom creations of Captain Atkin; under both the fan

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[21] H. Jenkins, *'Get a Life!': Fans, Poachers, Nomads*, in: E. Mathijs, X. Mendik (eds.), *The Cult Film Reader*, p. 434.

[22] Ibidem.

[23] W. Brooker, *Internet Fandom and the Continuing Narratives of Star Wars, Blade Runner, and Alien*, in: A. Kuhn (ed.), *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema*, London – New York 1999, p. 50.

creation forum and a forum on He-Man movie rumors, Atkin posted pictures of home-crafted action figures of the 1987 *Masters of the Universe*. While he asks for honest feedback, he gets nothing but praise, including this comment from mossmanmolds: "It makes the film look a part of the series." These comments demonstrate that a primary goal of these remixes is to revise a He-Man text that falls outside of the hierarchy to ensure that the text can become part of the canon; this is done primarily by emphasizing elements found in the alpha text of the Filmation cartoon.

The myriad of fan texts available on he-man.org are examples of what John Fiske calls "textual productivity" – an offshoot of "fan productivity." Fiske defines textual productivity as texts "produce[d] and circulate[d] among themselves [fans]" and posits that these texts "are often crafted with production values as high as any in the official culture."[24] Several of the fan creations demonstrate what Fiske calls "fan cultural capital," as the creations have an extensive "appreciation and knowledge of texts, performers, and events"[25]; specifically, in the case of He-Man fandom, the creations show an appreciation and knowledge of the primary alpha text, the Filmation cartoon. Fiske's argument is that these fan creations are "by definition, excluded from official cultural capital."[26] However, in the case of He-Man fandom, this is not necessarily the case. Because several fan creations attempt to re-create or pay homage to the alpha texts, among fans these fan-created texts actually carry more cultural capital than "official" mainstream texts (such as the live action film). Additionally, since fans are relentlessly re-creating trailers for the live action *Masters of the Universe*, offering alternate scripts, and speculating about what a future He-Man film should be, these fans are essentially declaring Goddard's film devoid of any value.

This textual poaching and productivity can be viewed as a reclamation project for fans. By creating trailers of what could have been (as Gwildor does) or sharing action figure creations based on the 1987 movie (as Captain Atkin does), it seems as though some fans are looking to reclaim the film; that is, because the film is not canon (and low on the hierarchy), these fans have chosen to find ways to make the film more "He-Man" or more canonical. They have recognized its weaknesses, and through knowledge of the alpha texts, have strived to create new texts – based on the original, non-canonical live action film – that fall in line with the alpha texts. Thus, the fan creativity serves as a kind of reclamation project.

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[24] J. Fiske, *The Cultural Economy…*, p. 450.
[25] Ibidem, p. 452.
[26] Ibidem.

Conclusion

John Fiske asserts that

> Fan texts, then, have to be 'producerly' in that they have to be open, to contain gaps, irresolutions, contradictions, which both allow and invite fan productivity.[27]

The same can also be said for anti-fan texts; by that, I mean fans of He-Man who despise the live action film because of its stark contrast to the Filmation cartoon have become – because of this contrast – producers of new texts that are more in line with the alpha texts. For the last thirty-three years, fans have been bemoaning the existence of the live action film and more recently, the advent of web 2.0 have given fans easy access to share their "improvements" to this particular non-canonical text. Additionally, they make use of fan boards and forums to discuss – continuously – why the film should not be considered canon and how their textual creations are, indeed, "better" than the Goddard film. These are all examples of intense performative interaction (a key element of cult films and its fanbase) being borne out of intense anti-fandom as opposed to celebration.

As such, persistent anti-fandom suggests that He-Man fans view *Masters of the Universe* as a cult film in a very non-traditional way. Most cult films are loved by a particular community – and have been studied as such. Mathijs and Mendik write

> [...] the consumption of cult cinema relies on continuous, intense participation and persistence, on the commitment of an active audience that *celebrates* films they see as standing out from the mainstream of 'normal' and 'dull' cinema.[28]

Why does it have to be a celebration of a film, though? Shouldn't all kinds of continuous, intense participation, and persistence – whether celebratory or not – be examined? Clearly, He-Man fans have continually, intensely, and persistently engaged with *Masters of the Universe*. The fans' ongoing relationship with the film, though, is built not on "active celebration," "communion," or "canonization," all aspects that Mathijs and Mendik deem necessary in order for a film to be considered cult; rather, the relationship is built on anti-fandom – an active and ongoing derision. The communion is not with the

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[27] Ibidem, p. 451.
[28] E. Mathijs, X. Mendik, *Editorial Introduction: What is Cult Film?*, in: E. Mathijs, X. Mendik (eds.), *The Cult Film Reader*, p. 4 (emphasis mine).

film, but rather with other anti-fans. And certainly, most fans of He-Man do not wish to canonize the film; rather, they wish to show how un-canonical the text is. Due to a rejection of the tradition and feelings of nostalgia rooted in He-Man fandom, the live action film alienated *He-Man* fans. In an ironic twist, however, fans of He-Man so intensely despise the film that they continually talk about why the film "sucks" on fan forums. In doing so, they continually reinforce the placement of the Filmation cartoon and the original toys at the top of the He-Man hierarchy. Additionally, this intense fan involvement leads to new creations, generally creations that remix the 1987 film, in an effort to show what could have been. These ongoing conversations have given the film new life; if fans ignored *Masters of the Universe*, it would more than likely disappear from regular circulation. Instead, these conversations keep *Masters of the Universe* in circulation and, I argue, makes it a cult film. Thus, I propose that the 1987 *Masters of the Universe* film demonstrates a possibility to re-think our understanding of cult film; specifically, I think scholars interested in cult film should be prepared to study both an intense celebration of a film – and the rituals that accompany those celebrations.

Summary

This chapter examines how anti-fandom can facilitate textual productivity by examining the cult classic *Masters of the Universe* (dir. Goddard, 1987), a film that is reviled by both critics and fans alike but continues to be discussed today. To that end, I explore how performative interaction can create anti-fandom as much as fandom – and that this anti-fandom can lead to repeated viewings and ongoing, intense conversations that criticizes, rather than lauds, a film. As such, I argue that although *Masters of the Universe* is ostracized by the He-Man fan community, the film can still be considered "cult" because of its strong, persistent anti-fan base. While this fan base may not celebrate the film conventionally, it does inspire performative interactions through both lively discussion on fan-sites and the creation of remixed fan-texts designed to reclaim the film as "canon" and thus an acceptable part of the He-Man mythos. Through this new understanding of the kind of performative interactions inspired by cult films, this chapter argues that despite the fans' rejection of the live action adaptation, Masters of the Universe (1987) remains important to the He-Man fan community as both a litmus test for what does and does define the fictional world of MOTU and for the wealth of new fan-created texts it has inspired. This chapter, then, not only expands our understanding of cult, but shows how anti-fandom can be just as powerful a facilitator of fan productivity as fandom, which can expand 21st century fan studies in productive ways.

Keywords: He-Man, cult, anti-fandom, fandom

Słowa kluczowe: He-Man, kult, anty-fandom, fandom

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The usual super–suspects: mundanity of the contemporary supervillains in Marvel Comics

Marvel Comics, one of the Big Two of the American comic book publishers, has secured its initial position on the comic book market with a peculiar approach to the superheroic protagonists, one unlike any other publisher in the market at the time. The distinguishing factor was the mundanity of the characters: while publishers like DC were focused on presenting relatively monolithic superheroes, sculpted to present the ideal of the human condition, Marvel's superheroes took the awesome powers that were bestowed upon them as much as a blessing as a curse. The superheroic activity, after all, has to be an element of one's life, and therefore balanced with more usual, down-to-earth activities.[1] This everyday appeal has been a part of the Marvel brand ever since its inception in the make-up of the positive characters, but this kind of favor has rarely been extended to their antagonists, the supervillains. In particular, when it comes to less prominent enemies, they were often used just as a threat, and not necessarily as fully-fledged characters. This has changed over the years, though; in fact, the most compelling cases for supervillains made in recent Marvel history are presented through keying in on the characters' mundanity, allowing not only for more complex character profiles, but also for extending worldbuilding regarding with the pettier kind of a supercriminal.

In order to demonstrate how some of the recent Marvel comics challenge the convention of the supervillain, one has to be established first. In the simplest of terms, a supervillain is an antagonist a superhero has to defeat in order to save the day. There is a distinction, however, between any enemy and

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[1] R. Duncan, M.J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture*, New York – London 2009, pp. 45–47.

a supervillain; a supervillain will always be – on some level or another – an equal to the hero. Both heroes and villains operate on similar basic conventions: they most often use a nickname, wear a costume, and have a set of extraordinary (if not supernatural) powers. The villains, however, will be very different when it comes toin their motivations and modes of operation. A villain is a dark reflection of a hero, either in a general sense (where additional classifiers, such as "the nemesis," might be employed), or in relation to particular aspects of the hero's character. Narrative-wise, The the villains are also, narrative-wise, essential to spurring the events on – while a hero is a reactive figure, always protecting an established status quo, a villain is proactive. As an agent of change in their immediate environment (even though it is mostly a change for the worse), a villain can have a much more personalized motivation than the ever-stalwart hero.[2]

The aspects of reflection and detail are best observed on a prominent notion when it comes to related to building a universe around a single hero, the rogues gallery. The rogues gallery is a phrase most commonly used to describe the totality of villains attributed to a single hero.[3] Since the hero is a continuous protagonist of stories often spanning decades, they need a steady influx of enemies to clash against, with various angles in their wrongdoings which would preserve the novelty of new encounters. These characters can work in separation, or team up to be even more of a threat in particular stories; regardless, grouping villains and attaching them to a hero they reflect is common. One of the best examples is the rogue gallery of Spider-Man, the a prominent Marvel superhero. Spider-Man's ethos – with great power, there must also come a great responsibility – lends itself to getting twisted in villainous ways. While Spider-Man understands that he has to uphold a sort of responsibility with the power he was given, his villains do not understand that principle. Most often given obtaining superpowers through various means, similarly accidental as in the case of Peter Parker, means, they have never learned the lesson Spider-Man did. Therefore, they use their power irresponsibly, selfishly, or in a generally society-harming deleterious manner. While they their goals might be varied, one hero always stands in their way, and so they might work above their individual differences to try and take him them down, as presented by the multiple formations of the supervillain team Sinister Six, focused much more on fighting Spider-Man with the united force of powerful villains rather than on any other short- or long-term goal.

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[2] Ibidem, pp. 229–230.
[3] Ibidem, p. 229.

Peter Coogan notes five types of a supervillain, with most of them most of which predating predate the medium of comics and the genre of superhero books: the Monster (an inhuman, savage enemy), the Enemy Commander (a head of a larger nefarious organization, usually holding legal authority), the Mad Scientist (an amoral researcher wielding science as magic), the Criminal Mastermind (a singularly intriguing criminal), and the Inverted Superhero-Supervillain (a villain who is specifically a reflection of the hero; the one type unique to the genre).[4] He notes that, while these are entirely separate distinctions, any villain does not necessarily have to be attached to one of them exclusively. For instance, Lizard, one of Spider-Man villains, is overtly monstrous, but his origins and methods will also relate to overlap with the mad scientist category. Coogan then carries on subsequently to establishes four sub-types of a villain: the alien, the evil god, the femme fatale, and the super-henchman.[5] The last one in this category latter will be particularly important to the section of the supervillainous world this article would like to explore; super-henchmen are, as Coogan notes,

> [...] those underlings who are have enhancements, superpowers, or superior abilities and so would seem to qualify as supervillains themselves. But as underlings, they lack the mania and drive of the supervillain.[6]

These characters usually work under another supervillain with more lofty ambitions, but they might also be used as a single-story enemy rather than a multi-issue threat. They also most often slot into the inverted superhero-supervillain type, as they relate to some aspect of the hero they are facing, rather than having prominent features typical of a higher-positioned villain.

Subversion of a villain's fate in the comics is not an invention of the modern books. Since the basic formal difference between a hero and a villain in a comic book story is the motivation and the mode of operation, the line between these elements is relatively easy to blur if there is a need for that. For years, a villain could be redeemed: they could join the heroic side of the world order by rejecting their previous entanglements. While for most of the characters established throughout the years as villainous that change of alignment will be a temporary diversion from the status quo (such as, for instance, the face turn of Doctor Doom in *Infamous Iron Man* series, only to return to his villainous self when Marvel decided to return to publishing books about his heroic nemeses, the Fantastic Four), for others the criminal past will be more of an element for their heroic origin story than a constant moral point of refer-

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[4] P. Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, Austin 2006, pp. 61–74.
[5] Ibidem, p. 74.
[6] Ibidem, p. 75.

ence to return to. An example here could be Hawkeye, a hero first introduced as an antagonist in *Tales of Suspense* featuring Iron Man, and who has since became a staple of various superhero teams. Prominently, the redemptive fate often concerns the inverted-superhero supervillains, as the narrative structure around them means the most significant difference between a hero and a villain of that kind is the set of morals a character possesses.[7]

Another established way of focusing on a character with the usual villainous mode of operation is employing the character in question as an anti-hero. Made popular in the comic books of late 1980s, and very prominent in the 1990s, an anti-hero is a character who, while working towards an end goal that is overall heroic, will not necessarily restrict themselves to ethical or morally valid actions in order to achieve that end goal. In comics, the anti-heroes are either characters written specifically for that grittier, more edgy approach to what superheroics entail, or popular villains who are given a chance at being the protagonist of their own book without conforming to the requirements of redemptive situations. A prime example here would be the character of Venom, a prominent Spider-Man villain, who has become a star of his own story in *Venom: Lethal Protector* (1993), and has been an on-and-off anti-hero ever since.

In time, however, the writers behind the comics started considering the villains as a topic extending beyond their usefulness to the narrative of a hero. The question of character interaction going beyond teaming up to attempt a focused concerted attack on a particular superhero arose. After all, if heroes formed a sort of internal society, villains had to have one as well. Perhaps the most notable example of that fact is the designation of Bar with No Name. The title has been held by multiple establishments (first appearing in a 1986 Captain America book to describe a villain meeting place in Medina County, Ohio), but the most notable one is located in the fictional reality of Marvel's New York. The Bar with No Name is a villain-only speakeasy, which reflects another facet of the criminal life in the Marvel universe. The villains do not only do the villains interact whenever they need to gang up on a hero, but they also spend their free time in the same space, unwinding after a day of crime, and enjoying various amenities a (relatively) ordinary pub can offer them. This setup adds to the mundanity of villainous life in a superheroic narrative: being a villain is, essentially, just another career path one can pursue, and just like every other profession, it has its own space for rest and relaxation (even if, in this particular case, the reader is mostly invited into this space in the context of superheroic interference, which is all but relaxing to the patrons).

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[7] Ibidem, p. 73.

This mundanity, in particular when it comes to with respect to the villains ranking lower in the publisher's importance order, is what can revivify an interest in otherwise unmemorable characters. The most prominent example of that is are *The Superior Foes of Spider-Man* (2013–2015), created by Nick Spencer and Steve Lieber. Spencer creates a story essentially about a power vacuum: while Doctor Octopus controlled the body of Peter Parker in *Superior Spider-Man* (2013–2014), the hero's rogues gallery lacked the mastermind to organize it properly. And so, the title of Sinister Six, the group that has been menacing Spider-Man for years, has been claimed by a group of small-time villains: Boomerang (a throwing weapons expert and self-styled leader), Speed Demon (a not very bright character with super-speed), Beetle (a legacy villain in an insect-like power armor and the actual brains in the team), Overdrive (a character capable of turning anything into a getaway vehicle with a secret intention of becoming a hero one day), and Shocker (a long-term Spider-Man villain with vibration-emitting gauntlets, working as the coward of the group). Notably, the group consists of only five members, which is played up for comedic purposes, with one of the characters noting that it contributes to their power by virtue of the element of confusion.

From the very first page, the series draws attention towards the ridiculous, one-note nature of the super-henchmen type supervillains. Boomerang, who is the audience point of view character throughout the most of the book, notes in the opening narrative monologue:

> I told them I was born in Australia, so they made me Boomerang. This is why the whole world hates you, by the way. An entire nation boiled down to what you can remember from that time you got high and watched Crocodile Dundee. Guess I should be glad I didn't end up some kinda kangaroo guy.[8]

A specific villainous identity is thrust upon the characters from forces without, rather than being an expression of oneself. What is more, it might be a sort kind of identity that reduces them to an unfortunate stereotype of one sort or another. Boomerang also notes in the same monologue that nobody ever asks what is inside his head, or what motivates him to go on; he is just a person in a boomerang-themed suit who is supposed to fight Spider-Man from time to time, lose, go to jail, and then try again, counting that this time the luck will be on his side.

While the whole series relies on one comedic conceit or another, it is important to note the general lens it uses to present its characters. The protagonist group is often ineffective, clumsy in action, or generally incompetent;

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[8] N. Spencer, S. Lieber, *The Superior Foes of Spider-Man*, New York 2016, p. 7.

however, their actions are never presented as redemptive or working towards a noble goal with ends justifying the means. The characters are villains, unrepentantly so, and are not moved to change their alignment by the events of the narrative (with the arguable exception of Overdrive, but his idealized switching sides has more to do more with him getting "discovered" by the heroes after an encounter rather than him actively working towards fighting for a good cause). On the contrary, the series lampoons the idea of truly redeemed villains by including the character of Abner Jenkins, hero alias Mach-VII, who used to be known as the original Beetle. Mach-VII is attributed assigned to Boomerang as a parole officer. He is as ineffectual as the person he is supposed to watch over, if not more: Jenkins is constantly presented as oblivious to Boomerang's lack of redemptive intentions, convinced that, similarly to himself, his new protégé will see the light soon enough. Mach-VII, while a competent hero in other books, is reduced here to a minor hindrance to the protagonist's own nefarious goals.

This villainous conviction in the protagonist group does not mean that the series presents the whole criminal underworld as a moral dead end, however. The overall status of this part of the universe, evince by the Spider-Man villains at the time of *Superior Spider-Man*, lends itself well to that. Doctor Octopus, controlling Pater Parker's body is more ruthless than the hero himself ever was, in attempt to be as efficient as a crime-fighter as he possibly can. This leads him to fighting low-life supervillains with cruelty and fear they would not expect from the usually friendly neighborhood hero. While it is a point that is made in the main *Superior Spider-Man* series, Spencer elaborates on it in *Superior Foes* by presenting the villainous point of view on the matter. This is achieved by presenting yet another facet of supervillain life usually left undiscussed: supervillain support groups. In the issues devoted to one of those, aptly named Super Villains Anonymous Club, a couple of villains present their horrifying stories of encountering the "new" Spider-Man, not unlike in a horror anthology (presented by guests writers and artists), and trying to process the trauma from those meetings, hopefully looking for a way out of the criminal life. What all of them note is that this interaction is an anomaly in what has become a routine: usually, Spider-Man would just entrap them in webs and leave for the authorities to collect; now, he leaves them gravely injured with a threat of more extreme measures if they ever engage in criminal activity. The existence of such a safety network for low-rung supervillains is interesting in and of itself, and builds up the mundanity as much as the aforementioned Bar with No Name. Here, the feeling of normalcy is also presented through a need for a community, but instead of the informal setting of a post-work hangout spot, the Super Villains Anonymous presents an

outreach system that is based on trauma processing, and intends to treat the one-note gimmick characters created to be "a villain of the week" with a level of gravitas that on the one hand might seem comical, but on the other adds to the depth of the criminal element of Marvel universe that does not seek world domination as a default strategy.

Spencer's ideas and characters are not contained to that single seventeen-issue run, either. The writer continues similar conceits in his following books. In *Ant-Man*: *Second Chance Man* (2015) and its sequel series, *The Astonishing Ant-Man* (2015–2016), Spencer takes on one of the established heroes who used to be villains – Scott Lang aka Ant-Man – making him a very imperfect character who nevertheless cares about doing good. Moreover, both series feature recurring characters from *Superior Foes*. This time, they are given the redemptive edge: the characters from the Super Villain Anonymous make their return, now as people looking for an honest job despite their villain-ous past and demeanor (who are consequently recruited by Ant-Man for his new security company). Beetle, one of the five-person Sinister Six also makes a return, remarking in the finale of the story that no one can know she is "secretly... a nice person"[9]; these representations tie into the overall theme of Spencer's Ant-Man books, which concern mostly the power of redemption and second chances. The actual villains of the books – in particular in *Astonishing Ant-Man* – explore another avenue that lends a sense of normalcy. The villain Power Broker introduces Hench, an app that enables villains to collect commissions on for crime from independent contractors through their mobile phones. Thus, through the "villain Uber," superpowered criminal activity becomes expressed through the ever-present contemporary issue of gig economy, in which the villains are compelled to participate.

Some of the threads introduced by Spencer, however, are also used by other creators. Most notably, Charles Soule uses another member of Superior Foes' main cast, Shocker, in his She-Hulk run (2013–2014) for the sake of building mundanity. Here, consistently with his depiction in Spencer's books, Shocker is presented as a coward, who tries to escape from the eponymous heroine at the first sight. It then turns out, however, that while cowardice was definitely a factor, it was also caused by a code the low-rung villains like him live by, which grades heroes depending on their power levels and the threat they are likely to cause, with "Hulks" and "Thors" at the top of that order. He explains that there are some heroes a villain like him can fight and maybe even win over, and there are those where the chances of victory are slimmer; but when it comes with to Hulks (the characters whose powers are similar to

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9   N. Spencer, R. Rosanas, *The Astonishing Ant-Man*, #10, 2016, p. 17.

The Incredible Hulk) and "Thors" (which, as the dialogue explains later on, means Asgardians in general; the villain claims they are "all Thors" out of convenience), the only reasonable course of action is to run away: a character such as himself cannot harm a hero of that magnitude, and will possibly end up with severe injuries at best. Here, Soule presents yet another building block towards the idea that being a villain in Marvel universe is a walk of life like any other, and, similarly to other jobs, it has a set of unwritten rules one gains insight into along with the experience in the trade.

Perhaps the most masterful expression of that particular approach, whereby the experienced villain who thinks of their circumstances as just another job, is best represented by the comics written by Saladin Ahmed. While the previous examples instances all exemplified regarded comedic takes on the genre, in one way or another, comedic takes on the genre, Ahmed's comics do not focus on this particular approach. Granted, one might find levity in the writer's books, as it often is in superhero comics, but they are not generally read as "comedy books," unlike the aforementioned texts by Spencer or Soule texts. I would like to take a closer look at one character in particular: the treatment Ahmed gave to the Absorbing Man, as presented in *Black Bolt* (2017–2018), written by Ahmed and drawn by Christian Ward.

The Absorbing Man, also known as Carl "Crusher" Creel, is a villain introduced in *Journey Into Mystery* 114 as an antagonist to Thor, but was also connected to the Hulk in later years was also connected to the Hulk. A convicted criminal, Creel's abilities bestowed upon him by Loki gave him the ability enabled him to absorb any kind of matter to gain its properties. Coogan observes perceives Absorbing Man as a typical inverted-superhero super-henchman; a character who can stand toe-to-toe with a godlike superhero, but the only reason he is not considered a hero is that he chooses not to adjust his morals to being a crimefighter.[10] The complete entire history of the character is rather long – and was covered in *Journey Into Mystery* 144 released in 1965, therefore – and an entire comprehensive summary of the fates of the character is not necessary. Suffice it to say, Absorbing Man has been historically used as a secondary muscle kind of an antagonist, with one of the very few distinguishing qualities being his ongoing relationship with supervillainess Titania.

Ahmed's *Black Bolt* has Creel imprisoned in a location hidden in the depths of space, where the protagonist of the story, the eponymous superhero Black Bolt, is being brought due to manipulation of his brother, Maximus. There, Absorbing Man works as a secondary character to the hero, helping him with his plans of a jailbreak. One of the issues gives the readers a very specific

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[10] P. Coogan, *Superhero…*, p. 76.

insight into Creel as a character: it presents him as a loving and abused son, a prize-fighter who went the wrong way, and a convict who took a deal from the Asgardian god Loki to gain his superpowers. But while this might seem like a justification of a character through a tragic backstory, the character himself does not see it that way; while he might admit that his lot in life was not good, he made the best he could out of it, and is proud of himself for it, noting that while he most often gets defeated by the heroes, the times where he manages to "punch a god" are immense accomplishments. He has what many would like to have – a satisfying job and a loving family – and believes that is all he needs, without the necessity of societal approval. This is a rare depiction of a villain's perception of their work. Mostly, a character would consider a villainous course of action a means to an end, heroic or other-wise. Absorbing Man, however, is a consummate professional of a working working-class supervillain. This is an ideal he also does not give up on over the course of the comic. Even when he seemingly makes a heroic sacrifice to help the hero, he has no intention of redeeming himself after returning to his usual circumstances (which happens, as his narrative returns to a more usual, albeit uniquely bizarre, villainous form in Al Ewing's *Immortal Hulk* series).

In his other works, Ahmed enforces the "rules of engagement" that have already been touched upon by writers like Soule. His *Miles Morales: Spider-Man* (2019 – on going) presents the classic Spider-Man supervillain Rhino, whom the titular version of the hero attemptsed to be stopped by the titular version of the hero. The characterization of Rhino at that particular point in time is predicated upon two points: one, that Rhino is so old enough that he does not know how to relate to a contemporary teen in the new young Spider-Man; and two, that he actively rejects fighting the hero, as he "does not live to punch people." Rhino is, once again, an example of how villains treat their criminal activity as a profession more than an identity; he will fight the hero when the job demands it, but when there is no reason to do so, he would rather take care of his other business.

In conclusion, it is important to note that these approaches to supervil-lains are not the only sympathetic (or sympathy-orientated) approaches to the subject, as they trying to present a nuanced angle accounting for the mundan-ity of that particular part of the convention, are not the only sympathetic (or sympathy-orientated) approaches to the subject. There also are books focused on villain introspection that were not covered in this article. However, these are most commonly devoted to prominent characters with lofty motivations and ambitious goals, and if they are sympathetic, they also focus on redeem-ing the villains (a notable case here would be *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl*, where every antagonist has the potential of becoming a friend by the end of

their arc). Here, I only wanted to highlight the examples of what creators do with the less popular supervillains – and demonstrate that, in the current superhero landscape, even the characters that we often consider one-note might be vessels vehicles for the world building of their immediate environment, and as well as contain a depth that makes them into characters worth exploring, whether in a comedic or earnest setting.

Summary

Superpowers-wielding heroes are often depicted in various ways. It is especially true for Marvel Comics, a publisher who has built its popularity on presenting superheroes not only as multiple-count world saviors, but also as mundane people with mundane problems, which are easy to relate to for the audience. This aspect has been different for the supervillains; the heroes' nemeses are sometimes their dark reflections, in other cases just a set of powerful adversaries the protagonists clash with, but they have rarely been given the lens of mundanity the heroes so often receive. This state has began to shift somewhat recently, in the modern Marvel Comics publications, indicating that a supervillain does not have to be an evil unknown, but can be an evil very human, mundane, or even work-ethic professional. This article discusses chosen examples of such depictions, focusing most notably on comics written by Nick Spencer and Saladin Ahmed, which are meaningful contributions to the development of the mundane perception of the supervillain, in particular when it comes to the less-superpowered or less-popular antagonists.

Keywords: superhero comics, Marvel Comics, supervillain, Spider-Man, Superior Foes, She-Hulk, Black Bolt

Słowa kluczowe: komiks superbohaterski, Marvel Comics, superzłoczyńcy, Spider-Man, Superior Foes, She-Hulk, Black Bolt

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Chronotope of redemption?
The model of superhero
narrative in the Thunderbolts comic series

Who are the Thunderbolts?

The Thunderbolts are a group of superheroes created in 1997 in the comic books published by Marvel, which continued to appear almost uninterruptedly until 2017, although its composition, writers and the principal rationale of the group's existence varied. Apart from the name, one essential common denominator was that the group comprised villains who, in one way or another, aspired to deserve the name of superheroes.[1] Hence, the main theme of the series, often referred to explicitly and widely commented within the comic itself, is redemption and the methods to achieve it in the superhero world.

This paper explores how the comic books about the Thunderbolts pursue the plot motif of redemption which – as I will attempt to demonstrate – is virtually beyond feasible within the medium of a comic book. For this purpose, I am going to employ the term of the superhero chronotope.

The chronotope: a brief methodological outline

In its contemporary form, the superhero comic book is a resultant of accrued social, market, political and cultural factors which yielded the intersubjective

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[1] Here, I do not include – and will disregard it in further analysis – the second, 32-volume *Thunderbolts* series published in 2013–2014, which essentially was not related in any way to other comic books about the Thunderbolts team, except the ambigous concept that superhero group can be made of morally ambiguous members (in this case Punisher, Elektra, Venom, Deadpool and Red Hulk).

conventions that affect both their creation process as well as their outside perception. A number of researchers define these conventions using a notion borrowed from Bakhtin, namely that of chronotope, which not infrequently happens to be translated as time-space in literary studies.[2] Although the author of the term admitted to having adopted it from the sciences, it seems legitimate to speak of chronotopes as opposed to time-space, partly so as not to generate unnecessary complications, and partly to avoid the association imposed by language, i.e. that the category describes merely the unity of time and space in a given cultural text because, as Bakhtin argues, the spatio-topical circumstances of a narrative engender much more than its spatial and temporal location alone.[3] In addition, as Stephen Packard notes, one cultural text may rely on multiple subsumed chronotopes, each of which not only governs the temporal-spatial aspects of the narrative, but also the manner of developing characters, the type of events or the expectations of the reader.[4]

According to David Hyman, one of the foremost properties of the superhero chronotope within the comic book medium[5] is its susceptibility to constant revision of the presented material (by virtue of repetition). This proclivity for reprocessing and overwriting the established elements of the narrative owes to the qualities of the medium itself and the temporal-spatial circumstances of the reader. As a medium, the superhero comic is extremely serialized,[6] which translates into the requirement of broadly understood continuity; although one can find narratives which are isolated, alternative or enclosed within their own chronotopes, such instances are relatively rare and are characterized – to use Umberto Eco's turn of phrase – by the dominance of the innovative elements over the repetitive ones.[7] Consequently, they are anything but orthodox works. A typical superhero chronotope is thus characterized by seriality with

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[2] Bakhtin deliberately drew and elaborated on a notion in the domain of "mathematical natural sciences," approaching it in a simplified fashion as "a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time." Cf. M.M. Bakhtin, *Czas i przestrzeń w powieści*, "Pamiętnik Literacki" 65(4)/1974, p. 273. Although initially Bakhtin used this term to explain concepts of time and space in novels, it is now established that chronotopes can be used in analysis of any narrative form.

[3] Ibidem, p. 276.

[4] S. Packard, *Closing the Open Signification: Forms of Transmedial Storyworlds and Chronotopoi in Comics*, "StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies" 7(2)/2015, p. 59.

[5] The cinematic variant of the superhero chronotope will possess different properties because of the inherent features of the medium, but this is an issue for a separate study.

[6] With certain exceptions obviously, but the majority of the superhero narratives are rooted in and rely on the serial formula. Cf. A. Meskin, *Defining Comics?,* "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism" 4(65)/2007, pp. 369–379.

[7] U. Eco, *Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics*, "Daedalus" 114(4)/1985, p. 162.

all the consequences it entails. However, we will focus on one of its characteristics, namely (more or less) open reactivity of such narratives, which was inherited after the 19th-century picaresque novels and appears superior to the susceptibility to revisions.[8] In simpler words, at plot level, one most often observes no actual and lasting changes in the life situation of the superhero characters, whereas the once determined status quo is sustained at thematic level.

Drawing on Eco once again, once could say that the above traits engender the distinctive dissonance of the superhero comic: nothing can change in the long run, but due to the rules of the superhero narrative nothing can last; the protagonists have to face successive ordeals and struggle with one challenge after another in order to keep the reader interested. On a micro-scale, the struggle of a single superhero over several years of the publishing series will be shown as classic plot sine wave based on their successes and failures. Internet pundits interested in comic books (such as Leo Dryden, essayist with an academic background, who communicates his findings using YouTube[9]) often refer to superhero narratives as being suspended in a "permanent second act," a notion mediated in the core of Joseph Campbell's monomyth[10] and the directly derived three-act structure of a motion picture work[11]; speaking in the most general terms, after a more or less elaborate origin story of a character – which usually meets the specifications of the Campbellian call to journey – there follows a part associated with ordeals and challenges that the protagonist has to overcome. However, unlike with mythical heroes a broadly understood change is not his or her goal, therefore one never sees the stage of return where – as in Campbell – the protagonists initiates the change of the binding status quo. As a result, the stage of ordeal and struggle stretches into infinity, exposing – on a macro-scale – the tragic incapacity of the superhero to make any lasting changes; the latter – if they occur – are related to factors which are extraneous to the comic narrative, such as generational change or the shift of the current paragym according to which superhero stories are constructed.

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[8] U. Eco, *Superman w kulturze masowej. Powieść popularna: między retoryką a ideologią*, transl. J. Ugniewska, Warsaw 1996, pp. 21–22.

[9] *Implicitly Pretentious*, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCfNcetb0dXVk53jZ9I0uKnA [1.05.2021].

[10] J. Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Novato 2008, p. 28. Aside of other narrative structures, such as those of Wladimir Propp, the Campbell's theory was widely recognised in Hollywood.

[11] Which is not obligatory but occurs very widely, especially in productions designed to achieve commercial success. M. Brütsch, *The Three-Act Structure: Myth or Magical Formula?*, "Journal of Screenwriting" 6(3)/2015, pp. 301–326.

> The superhero genre's unique chronotope is both the result of and the catalyst for the continuing practice of revisions as its dominant mode of composition; [...] the purpose of which is the generation of new textual material, which for the superhero narrative always involved the negotiation between what has been and what will be written.[12]

Finally, it may also be downright discontinuation of the adventures of a character – most often due to low sales figures – occasionally causing a superhero to disappear from view, leaving their represented world in a better state that they had found it.[13]

Incidentally, the inability to go beyond the "permanent second act" and the effect of the perennial return to the established status quo entails two crucial consequences for the superhero narratives. The first consists in a cumulative effect as a given narrative becomes harmonized with the rest of the shared universe; thus, even major shifts with respect to the baseline situation, such as the death of the main protagonists or change of their status, are revoked after several year at most. This often involves negating character development and a return to their default status. Indirectly, the phenomenon makes it impossible to resolve humankind's actual issues, such as cancer, climate change, social injustice etc. within the superhero chronotope. Such achievements would change the status quo so profoundly that a return might prove unworkable. Those comic series where such solutions were adopted inevitably headed towards dystopia, as it is humorously conveyed by the creators of the TVTropes encyclopaedia in the entry *Reed Richards is useless.*[14]

Still, we are going to focus in particular on a different feature of the superhero chronotope which, being typical of many other narratives in the popular circulation, is defined by Eco as a Manichean ideology[15] that absolutizes structural elements of reality through opposition. The essence of the structure lies in distinct and arbitrary duality of the represented world, in which moral stances are rendered absolute at the most elementary level of the narrative, as

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[12] D. Hyman, *Revision and the Superhero Genre*, London 2017, p. 34.

[13] To be fair, it must be admitted that in the American superhero comic this depends to a greater degree on the villains than on the protagonists; this was also noted by Eco in connection with his deliberations concerning James Bond (U. Eco, *Superman...*, pp. 212–213). The protagonists strive to maintain a more or less static character, whereas the antagonists in such serial narratives constitute the proactive element, with the exception that they act to the detriment of a given community. Thus, it is their inevitable defeat that should be read as restoring harmony to the world, at least until the writers of another comic book within the shared universe decide to use the villain again. One of such characters is Mason Sackett, the father and adversary of the superhero called Mosaic (*Mosaic* 2016–2017, pp. 1–5).

[14] *Reed Richards is Useless*, TVTropes, https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ReedRichardsIsUseless [2.05.2021].

[15] U. Eco, *Superman...*, p. 214.

one group of characters is designated as evil while the other is defined as good. The division is so deeply engrained in the comic medium that until the 1970s it influenced even the colours. In that period – often due to the shortcomings of the printing process – positive characters were designed using primary colours (red, blue, yellow, and their derivatives), while the negative protagonists were distinguished by a palette of derivate colours, mainly green and various shades of purple. Thus, in the frames which employed a substantial perspective and showed multiple characters or the characters were indistinct due to printing errors, one easily recognized who was who or what the figures stood for. Naturally, there were some inconsistencies in that respect (Marvel's Hulk, Green Arrow and Green Lantern in DC), but over the decades they were the exceptions which confirmed the rule.

While it cannot be denied that over time the American superhero comic introduced increasingly complex characters and enhanced the existing ones, so that the dichotomy of the initial Manichean arrangements not infrequently lost some of its significance, the mainstream comic book narratives have departed from it. In fact, the superhero chronotope is primarily oriented towards plots based on conflict, which grows proportionally more acute to the discrepancy between the attitudes or value systems of the opponents. Since the serial nature of the medium by default leads to repetitive clashes of particular characters, the superhero conventions nearly automatically tends to mark some beings as "good" and others as "evil."[16] The unique traits of that automatic process are in themselves interesting, given that in the narratives which Marie-Laure Ryan describes as "pitching a character,"[17] the attention of the reader is always on the protagonist (individual or collective) and the relationships with other characters are constructed with respect to their world of values. This includes determination which attitudes and in which circumstances may conform to the represented norm and which may not (actually causing the protagonist to decide who is "good" and who is "evil" from the standpoint of the narrative structure). However, this is a matter of secondary importance here, as two other issues seem more important.

First, the "label" attached at one point may change, but the superhero convention does not admit such shifts easily. It may be noted in advance that it virtually never applies to the transformation of a "good" character into an

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[16] I am going to employ such simplified categories without formulating detailed definitions what they mean or may mean, as in practice they are as ephemeral as they are arbitrary and (almost) absolute.

[17] M.-L. Ryan, *Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality*, "Poetics Today" 3(34)/2013, p. 382.

"evil" one[18]; attempts are made, of course, but prove to be more or less short-lived experiments (pertinent examples include *Superior Iron Man* by Tom Taylor or *Immortal Hulk* by Al Ewing and Steve Bennett[19]) or alternative versions of a given character (which, to remain with Marvel, is exemplified by Maker: Reed Richards from the *Ultimate Comics* imprint, who became a villain in the wake of traumatic experiences and was transferred as such to the main, shared universe[20]). The reverse occurs much more often, from Punisher, Morbius or Venom in Marvel to Harley Quinn in DC. However, in all cases this is the yield of long and consistent efforts of the writers and editors who very consciously move a character towards a more acceptable status quo (which will be discussed in greater detail precisely with respect to the Thunderbolts). Occasionally, lack of consistency leads to the return of a character to the original "label." Still, certain shifts are possible, and the contemporary reader of the American superhero comic is well aware of the fact.

At the same time, despite the more or less sophisticated plots the tendency to absolutize the categories of "good" and "evil" – or a Manichean paradigm of fictitious reality – is evident in the superhero chronotope. This is particularly striking in the less refined superhero narratives, such as the grand comic events or crossovers; stories such as *Secret Wars*[21] or *Axis*[22] explicitly rely on the designations of "good" and "evil" to inform the main axis of the conflict.[23] This categorization is therefore undoubtedly inherent in the superhero chro-

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[18] One could cite many reasons behind such a state of affairs but, following the rules according to which chronotopes are shaped and function, one should primarily draw attention to the genre determinants of the superhero comic, which do not differ much from Altman's concept of genre cinema. Thus, if one assumes the findings of Charles Altman as true, genres which enjoy popularity due to e.g. their functionality will favour attitudes which are socially well-established and desirable as morally appropriate, and therefore superior to other values (Ch.F. Altman, *W stronę teorii gatunku filmowego*, transl. A. Helman, "Kino" 6/1987, p. 22). Hence, a protagonist cannot permanently go over to the "evil" side, because that would mean that the stance of the "good" ones is flawed.

[19] The series continues to be published as this paper is being written, but it has been announced to end with issue #50. See S. Stone, *Marvel's* Immortal Hulk *to End at Issue #50*, CBR. com, https://www.cbr.com/marvels-immortal-hulk-end-issue-50/ [12.07.2020].

[20] Maker is featured in multiple series, from *New Avengers* by Al Ewing, through *Future Foundation* by Jeremy Whitley to *Venom* by Danny Cates, being thus elevated to the rank of one of the chief schemers in the Marvel universe.

[21] Both in the original event from 1984 and the 1985 continuation, the characters are assigned to the sides of the conflict in accordance with their "baseline" affiliation with the arbitrarily defined groups of the "good" and the "evil."

[22] Event from 2014–2015, in which superheroes and supervillains literally "switched sides"; the "evil" became the "good" and the other way around.

[23] Occasionally, this may be subject to travesty in order to increase the attractiveness of the crossover; all major Marvel events from 2004–2012 relied on the conflict of characters which had been traditionally labelled as "good."

notope, regardless of the degree of narrative sophistication or attempts to relativize the values that superheroes adhere to.

A chronotope geared to operate in that fashion assumes an interesting form when the inherently vital structure of the represented world is additionally thematized, i.e. the shift from the "evil" to the "good" side becomes the principal motivation of the protagonists while the axes of the narrative conflicts are aligned with that goal. Another factor here is proactive and consistent action to surmount the superhero comic's immanent suspension in the "permanent second act," meaning actual striving of the characters to change the status quo of the represented world and their own. In other words, when the aim of the protagonists – and thus the comic book narrative – is redemption.

As already noted, this paper aims to verify – using the example of the Thunderbolts – how the superhero chronotope can be "overwritten" by premises which in a sense contradict the latter. Indirectly, we will also be interested in finding out about the narrative means which were used by the authors of the comic books recounting the adventures of the team to reconcile the all-out actions intended to change the status quo and the chronotope structure, which essentially does not permit such changes. However, let us start from the beginning.

Who are the Thunderbolts?

The first iteration of the Thunderbolts was introduced in quite singular circumstances for the Marvel universe, as its appearance was apparently a response to the absence (both in the fictitious world and on the shelves of comic book stores) of the leading superhero teams, the Avengers and the Fantastic Four in the main. Due to an elaborate crossover of 1996, both teams were relocated to an alternative reality where their adventures were to be retold as part of the Heroes Reborn story arc. The Thunderbolts – the group composed of entirely new characters – functioned then as a substitute for heroes, whose popularity had been established and who had their recognizable place in the Marvel universe, representing a specific chronotope variant, which presupposed e.g. team action, protecting the world against particular kinds of threats and a dynamics based on working through differences between individual protagonists. From the start, the comic books about the Avengers were the main point of reference for the Thunderbolts; in fact, the line-up of the team offered potential for a recreation of the functional relationships among the Avengers, which would become a repeated motif at various points in the development of the series. Today, it is no secret for anyone that the identities of

the original Thunderbolts members were aliases of the universe's previously well-known villains: Baron Zemo (masquerading as Citizen V[24]), Goliath (Atlas), Moonstone (Meteorite), Beetle (Mach-1), Screaming Mimi (Songbird) and Fixer (Techno). The reader of the original comic book would find out about it quite soon, in the very first issue,[25] which is why in the subsequent stories their attention was able to focus chiefly on the machinations of Baron Zemo, aiming to win the favour of the public, and in the further adventures of the team members who to greater or lesser degree found themselves content in the role of heroes. Gradual development of the narrative thus constructed was violently interrupted in issue #10, Baron Zemo disclosed the true identities of the team members to the public to curb their ever more pronounced heroic inclinations. In fact, the revelation was precipitated by the return of the Avengers and the Fantastic Four to the Marvel universe, which upended the plans of the writers and the editors, forcing them to look for a new concept; thus the Thunderbolts turned against Baron Zemo and took the road to redemption led by a former member of the Avengers, Hawkeye.

When analyzing the variant of the superhero chronotope which was specific to *Thunderbolts*, it is worthwhile to set out from the literal time-space in which the plot takes place. At first sight, it is no different from the one known from the Avengers comics; the group of the protagonists are situated – as we already know – in the adventurous plot modality, in whose key points are regular conflicts with more or less fantastic villains, who have advanced technology at their disposal, are possessed of abilities that endanger the world or expose it to often total but not hardly fully conceptualizable threats: from a leak from the wellspring of power, through disintegration of the world to an omnipotent cosmic cube with a personality of a little girl. Those abstract though spectacular threats are interspersed with less dramatic, local conflicts, causing the chronotope to proceed the along the tested picaresque path following the sine wave of conflicts and moments respite between them, which

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[24] Just as an aside, it may be noted that in its first version Citizen V is a drastically contrived character; even though his outfit based on the symbolism of the American flag, the values he represents are not readily apparent and he is compelled to clarify it, such as the fact that "V" in his name stands for "Victory," not the Roman numeral five. Incidentally, the same applies to the name "Thunderbolts," derived by Citizen V from a verse in a poem by Thomas Randolph: "Justice, like lightning, ever should appear to few men's ruin, but to all men's fear," which also needs to be explained to the outside observer. There is an extra nuance in the fact that the co-author of the script and concept of the series, Kurt Busiek, used the quote by mistake, drawing on the reminiscences from the comic books by Roy Thomas; in fact, Randolph never wrote a poem where such two verses were to be found. The personal details fabricated by Baron Zemo become only more spurious because of that.

[25] Published in January 1997.

are indispensable in order to build relationships within the group, delineate subsequent conflicts and prepare the heroes for the upcoming fight. The adventurous nature of the chronotope is splendidly evinced by the exploits of a part of the team beginning with issue #163, when several members of the groups flee from their superiors teleporting with their base to different periods, from the Middle Ages to Victorian England, each time adopting a different variant of the picaresque chronotope.

Such a narrative also determines the space in which the protagonists function, travelling between various, usually technologically advanced bases of their opponents, other dimensions and their own headquarters, occasionally seeking leisure in more "civilian" locations, such as bars, universities, spas etc., which constitute a spatial counterpoint for the fantastic, magically or technologically advanced regions of their superhero activity. It also serves to anchor the adventures of the Thunderbolts in a world which in many respects resembles reality; after 2004 and the substantial narrative update in Marvel's comic books, that "realistic" element becomes more pronounced though it never predominates (with a simultaneous impact on the flow of information; for instance, the relations of the protagonists with the media, especially television, are always an important element of the chronotope).

It does not end there, however. *Thunderbolts* utilize the tropes engendered within the superhero plots, but draw on them in a manner typical of the stereotypical notions of how villains function. The web of manipulation, betrayal and hidden motives – which will be discussed further on – is a vital motive power of the plot. Also, the members of the team in its various iterations never aspire to be model characters in any way, even if some epitomize positive superhero paragons when compared with others. And thus, next to characters which are openly coded as repulsive (and seeking no redemption), such as Joystick, Venom, Bullseye, Mister X or the later incarnation of Moonstone, there are protagonists who are somehow flawed, often lost or prone to crime (the best example of which is Speed Demon, who exploits the status of a Thunderbolts member to rob banks). They are also given more leeway in general, using alcohol statistically more often than other superheroes. On the other hand, with the exception of the relationship between Songbird and Mach-1, romantic themes are practically absent; if characters do engage in intimate relationships, they do it only for the sake of manipulating the other person.[26]

Their temporal circumstances, encompassing the assumption of superhero roles and striving for redemption, scheming with or against one another

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[26] Albeit coded as honest and elaborate, the Moonstone and Hawkeye romance is later described as a means the former used to influence the leader of the Thunderbolts.

and giving in to their own weaknesses also have a bearing on the less than superheroic spaces which provide the main setting of the plot, their bases most of all. They are either hidden in a remote, desolate area or look like the headquarters of villains in James Bond films and books (often being found inside mountains), or they are explicitly referred to as "hideouts," which is how Songbird speaks of the headquarters of the team in *New Thunderbolts* from November 2004). Thus, in contrast to the team chronotope in Marvel's comics, where superheroes usually have an imposing and widely recognizable base (the Avengers Tower, Baxter Building, Xavier's School etc.) those spaces are – just as their residents – serving "good" purposes, but originally connoting association with the "evil" ones.[27]

This is not the only example of semiotic tension between "good" and "evil" which developed within that chronotope variant. Its very important aspect – also given the publishing perspective – is situating the team in a constant relation to a positive reference in the shape of Avengers and, on the other hand, the negative reference of the varied supervillains or criminal groups. This is vividly palpable in the stories by Fabian Nicieza, who often juxtaposed the team with the Masters of Evil (from which the original Thunderbolts stemmed), reminding the characters – and the readers – of the team's point of departure and the long way they have come.

One should draw attention to the evident aspiration of the Thunderbolts to occupy the same semiotic space as the Avengers, their positive reference. This can be seen in how their mutual relationships are constructed: the emergence of the Thunderbolts was directly caused by the absence of the Avengers, just as the later incarnation of the team, the New Thunderbolts, openly becomes active at the news of the Avengers being disbanded in the aftermath of events in *Avengers: Disassembled*; finally, the Dark Avengers, who following the crossover entitled *Secret Invasion* took over the place of the team proper, was largely composed of members of the Thunderbolts. Still, the references to the Avengers occur more frequently, for instance due to the presence of Hawkeye and Luke Cage, who led various incarnations of the team. The groups even collaborate,[28] but happen to compete on several occasions as well (e.g. adventures of the team's original members, at least until the moment the New Thunderbolts were established, ends with the miniseries *Avengers vs Thunderbolts* from 2004, in which both teams clash due to mutual distrust but

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[27] The Thunderbolts Towers from the comic books by J. Parker is an exception of a kind, but the structure is a part of a prison complex, therefore it openly connotes a place inhabited by wrongdoers and a space of rehabilitation.

[28] In issue #44 of the *Thunderbolts* series in 2001 the teams became allies to defeat the evil Count Nefaria.

have to overcome the animosities later to manage the threat caused by the reckless ambition of Moonstone; or, on instructions from the CSA the group duels with the newly-formed New Avengers in *New Thunderbolts* #13 from October 2005), and complement their line-up (Thunderbolts assist the Avengers Initiative in hunting down illegal superheroes after the *Civil War* in 2007, whereas in the Dark Avengers era the Thunderbolts tends to be called their "sister" team). Here, one constructs a dichotomy of the relations between the rehabilitated supervillains and the superheroes – on the one hand, the Thunderbolts may model themselves on the Avengers, but they are still a squad of individuals who are capable of actions that genuine superheroes cannot or do not want to undertake. As may be guessed, in the stories focusing on the striving for redemption, the latter aspect will engender various tensions and ordeals for the Thunderbolts members (such as those faced by Moonstone in the later incarnations of the team), in whose eyes their freedom to act legitimized their amorality.

One of the distinctive and recurring traits of the chronotope developed in the *Thunderbolts* comic is the fairly unique composition of the team. In the more or less redemption-oriented undertakings (the leitmotiv in the adventures of all iterations of the team, in fact), the members of the team always adopt attitudes which could be rated on a scale from the least to the most proactive. The attitudes themselves span a spectrum between the extremes of pure heroism on the one hand and the villainous relapse on the other, which is represented by two characters. At first those were, respectively, Jolt (teenage heroine who joined the Thunderbolts genuinely believing them to be heroes) and Baron Zemo; in a number of subsequent iterations the heroic side included Hawkeye, the rehabilitated Songbird, as well as Black Widow or Luke Cage (Avengers veterans) later; next to Zemo, the opposing side consisted of Norman Osborn (former adversary of Spider-Man) or Crossbones (killer of Captain America, who was placed on the team patently to provide a negative reference for the rest).

The solution causes the dynamics of seeking redemption to differ depending on the character, and much emphasis is placed on the hidden agenda and committed errors, which results in a very extensive range of plot devices. On top of that, the rotation of the team members is quite considerable. Thus, the many ways in which various characters strive for redemption creates an impression of constant progress, even when at some point one of them strays so far that their development is temporarily halted.

Simultaneously, thus designed, the personal structure of the chronotope – providing that specific conditions are met – allows for a successful rehabilitation, i.e. a conversion into a "good" one which is permanent and con-

tinues to be respected by the writers. Apart from the obvious and already noted psychological aspect, such a device has yet another function, namely to legitimize the rationale of one's path to redemption which to a varying degree proves effective. This also tallies with the poetics of the earlier superhero narratives, chiefly those from the Silver Age of the American comic book, when the division into the "good" and the "evil" was incredibly rigid, but a potential defection had all the hallmarks of being thorough and lasting. This is best exemplified by the second line-up of the Avengers, often called the "Cap's Kooky Quartet," which next to Captain America included Hawkeye (whose alleged criminal past began to be treated more and more seriously by the writers as time went by, which – curiously enough – culminated in his taking command of the Thunderbolts) as well as Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch (originally members of the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, who expressed willingness to join the Avengers and were accepted… based on a letter of recommendation[29]). After the Silver Age, such rapid redemptions were incomparably more seldom and endured most often until a character was selected by a writer who preferred its initial mental and moral profile (there are dozens such protagonists in Marvel, from the enemies of Spider-Man, such as Sandman[30] or Superior Spider-Man,[31] through the complex relationships of X-Men-related figures – with Emma Frost[32] and Juggernaut[33] at the fore – to Doctor Doom, who appeared either as a positive[34] or negative[35] character, depending on the concept of the writer). This applies to the members of the Thunderbolts as well, barring two characters so far, the aforementioned Mach-1 and Songbird.[36]

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[29] *Avengers* #16, May 1965.

[30] Who abandoned villain career in *Marvel Two-In-One* #86 (1982), but resumed it in *Peter Parker: Spider-Man* #12, December 1999.

[31] Or the nemesis of the true Spider-Man, Dr Octopus, who took over his body and mind, which induced him to choose the hero path in *Amazing-Spider-Man* #700 from 2012. After a series of more or less improbable adventures, Superior Spider-Man obtained a new body and acted as a superhero until the finale of the series *Superior Spider-Man* in October 2019, when he sided with "evil" once again.

[32] Who began going over to the "good" side in issue #314 of *Uncanny X-Men* from 1994, but returned to morally doubtful behaviours towards the end of the miniseries *Death of X* (2016) and has remained an "ambivalent ally" of X-Men ever since.

[33] Juggernaut occasionally joins the teams on the side of "good," such as the X-Men in the 2001 series *X-Men Forever* or in Jeff Parker's *Thunderbolts*, but he is equally often employed in various stories as a villain.

[34] As in the series *Savage Avengers* by Gerry Duggan and Mike Deodato Jr. from 2019.

[35] This takes place in the *Fantastic Four* series by Dan Slott and Sara Pichelli from 2018.

[36] On certain conditions, the group may also be said to include Fixer, who in *Thunderbolts* #174 from 2012 also made a heroic sacrifice. However, the act was invalidated in the crossover *Avengers Standoff! Assault on Pleasant Hill*, since which time Fixer has usually appeared in the company of villains. On a smaller scale, the same happened to other nearly reformed villains:

Screaming Mimi or Songbird?

The latter character deserves some more attention, as she represents the most consistent and, up to date, unrepealed development as a hero. A member of the Thunderbolts since the beginning, Melissa Jean Gold alias Songbird relied crucially on the strong masculine characters around her, which is also stressed with respect to her history. In the early period, virtually every decision she takes is influenced by Baron Zemo or Abe Jenkins (Mach-1), with whom she promptly develops a passionate bond. Her submissiveness makes her appear the most innocent among the group, and the impression is enhanced by the unremarkable criminal past; admittedly she would be featured as Screaming Mimi in Marvel comic books beginning in 1979 (she debuted in issue #54 of *Marvel Two-In-One*), though practically always as a fairly bland character belonging to larger groups (the only exception is her one-time criminal duet with a man, Angar Screamer, who definitely took the lead there). Her innocence and compliant stance occasionally confront her with typically heroic ordeals, when e.g. she has to overcome her fear to stop the denizens of the Citadel of Elements, who have already captured the rest of her team, from taking over the world.[37]

Two critical moments in her development are being rejected by Hawkeye[38] (who she unthinkingly treated as yet another man that she should submit to; his resistance led her to gradually discover her subjectivity and become independent of men) and sacrificing the pardon she has just been granted (and her friends) to save the world from an invasion of aliens.[39] From that moment onwards, Songbird takes initiative increasingly often, works through her traumas and, in the Jungian sense, achieves the "unity of the Self"[40]; not only does she accept her criminal past, but turns it into an asset (at some point embarking on criminology studies[41]), takes her relationship with Jenkins further, but she is not afraid to end it either when their views of the world begin to diverge too much. Also, it is she who in the finale of the series written by Nicieza[42]

Blackheath, Blizzard, Radioactive Man, Atlas, Ghost or Moonstone, who nevertheless successively returned to the status quo.

[37] This takes place in *Thunderbolts* #8 from 1998.

[38] Hawkeye does so in issue #29 of the series from 1999.

[39] In *Thunderbolts* #58, January 2002.

[40] C.G. Jung, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, transl. G. Adler, R.F.C. Hull, London 1991.

[41] She is a student since *New Thunderbolts* #1 from 2004.

[42] *Thunderbolts* #108 from 2007; Songbird exploits her natural vocal talents to crush the crystals of power held by Zemo.

ultimately thwarts the plans of Baron Zemo's to use the Thunderbolts to seize power over the world, in a sense arriving at the end of the road to redemption. In the subsequent incarnations of the team, she would henceforth be present as a kind of moral compass, at times (in *Thunderbolts* #57 and #109) sacrificing her freedom to prevent the other Thunderbolts from straying from the path.

Because the character of Songbird is fairly stable and displays the most distinct path of development (overlapping with the Campbellian core mono-myth), as well as appears in the majority of the team's incarnations, she provides a reference point for the other protagonists. Her presence demonstrates that rehabilitation is possible, even if it is actually attained only by herself and Abe Jenkins aka Mach-10[43] (who nevertheless breaks the law once again in what is so far the last[44] series of comic books about the Thunderbolts by Jim Zub and John Malin, which indirectly leads to his death). The status of Songbird as a "good" character proves lasting enough to ensure her a place among the members of the New Avengers, led by Roberto da Costa in the *New Avengers* series by Al Ewing and Gerardo Sandoval from 2015. She has also been accepted to join S.H.I.E.L.D permanently.

The impossible redemption?

A question arises here, namely why Songbird was the only one to actually succeed among nearly all other heroes who shave sought redemption. It seems that the answer lies in how members of the consecutive iterations of the team are selected; in this respect, two types of Thunderbolts line-ups can be distinguished.

The first follows to some extent the pattern of the original team, which was composed of a recognizable villain and an assortment of third- or fourth-rate antagonists of various superheroes.[45] Such iterations have their evident point of reference in the rehabilitation potential, correlated with the super-hero chronotope, in particular maintaining the status quo, as the less notorious "evil" are endowed with the greatest potential for development which will not interfere too profoundly with the stable baseline circumstances. Most

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[43] Jenkins changed the numeral in his pseudonym with each successive version of his armour.

[44] Issue #13 of the 2019 *Punisher* series features yet another incarnation of the Thunderbolts led by Baron Zemo (who again masquerades as Citizen V), consisting of Fixer, Moonstone, Radioactive Man, Ghost and Paladin (impersonated by Punisher's arch-enemy, Jigsaw). However, the group remained active for only three issues, and were no more than Zemo's mercenaries.

[45] This may be fairly objectively established, given how often they appeared with the "evil" ones, as well as the impact they had on the superheroes who fought them.

often (though not exclusively), this model involves adoption of new identities by the member of the team, which symbolically severs their ties with the criminal past.[46] The model was employed to construct both the first iteration of the team and the second Thunderbolts line-up led by Hawkeye (where the reformed villain became the leader) in the comic books by Nicieza and Mark Bagley, the Redeemers introduced in the very same series (again headed by Zemo pretending to be Citizen V) and the team conceived by Andy Diggle (with Black Widow as their field commander[47]). The detailed lay-out of the particular team iterations – in this specific context.

The second model is based on the redemption-focused chronotope variety, in that it is superimposed with a potentially inconceivable situation in which rehabilitation is attempted by characters whose villain status is well-established and considered canon. For the sake of balance, the team also includes already recognizable characters who are either veterans from the previous iterations or tend to be associated with the "good" ones (though not without reservations; after all, the Thunderbolts chronotope is founded on the potential ambivalence of its members). The first such team was the New Thunderbolts formed by Abe Jenkins, in which besides Songbird, Atlas and the superheroes Genis-Vell and Nighthawk there are Blizzard, Radioactive Man, Swordsman and Joystick (somewhat less known at the time). To a certain degree, this also applies to the Thunderbolts operating on the Counter-Earth simultaneously with Hawkeye's second line-up, but the former saw an interesting reversal of roles: the original team members (except for Songbird) functioned as the "good" ones and were thus treated by the inhabitants of the planet, while the villain who embarked on rehabilitation was none other than Baron Zemo himself.[48] However, perhaps the most spectacular iteration of that team model was created in the comic books by Warren Ellis and Mike Deodato Jr. where, next to Songbird and Moonstone, it was composed of Radioactive Man and Swordsman as well as the villains Venom, Bullseye and Norman Osborn (known previously as Green Goblin) who, in view of the rich and not infrequently dramatic history of crime and struggle against the superheroes,

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[46] This is the case with Mach-1 and the character of Songbird discussed below who – next to Atlas – were the only ones to keep their superhero monikers, permanently abandoning their villain personalities (in the case of Mach-1 – Abe Jenkins – his "evil" alter ego, Beetle, would since then be used by at least two criminals). As a rule, an overwhelming majority of the other members of the Thunderbolts remained stuck to their "evil" identities, in a sense foreshadowing that their rehabilitation will not last.

[47] Songbird was on the team as well, but in that iteration the Thunderbolts very quickly turned against her.

[48] He appeared in the same role in the New Thunderbolts, gradually ousting Jenkins and taking over control of the team.

defied the very idea of redemption. A similar principle underlay the two teams gathered by Luke Cage in the series by Jeff Parker.

In the second model, one only sporadically witnesses a character strive for redemption; on the pages of the comic books, the canonical villains pursue their own agendas, occasionally acting – concomitantly, as it were – for the common good in the broad sense, rather than trying to atone for past misdeeds or earn pardon. Thus, their presence more often suggests the predominance of the second aspect of the chronotope which is characteristic of *Thunderbolts*, namely multilayered intrigues and betrayals.

This is because yet another consequence of a superhero chronotope structured in this fashion is that the various iterations of the Thunderbolts are not infrequently a team *à rebours*; whereas the traditional superhero team narrative recognizes the positive value of cooperation and working through reciprocal resentment in the name of a higher good, the individual members of the Thunderbolts – though they regularly happen to be after similar goals – dedicate equal (if not greater) effort in each case to see to their secret objectives and vested interests. The threads of trust – if at all present – almost never span the entire team but merely link some of the members; lies, hidden agendas and betrayals are partaken in even by those characters who are closest to redemption or stand already on the "good" side. This is perhaps the least evident in the comic books by Nicieza, which despite everything do focus on the motif of redemption, but even there the straightforward Atlas conceals having met a female criminal called Man-Killer in a bar, and in the later issues (published in 2005–2007), the reformed Songbird gets closer to Baron Zemo so as to ultimately implement her own plan of depriving him of power. As a result, the members of the teams written by e.g. Nicieza, Ellis or Diggle fight more often with one another than with any external threat (this is less palpable in Parker's or Zub's stories, but it never disappears altogether).

Dark Avengers?

The above, briefly discussed elements make up the characteristics of the superhero chronotope which developed within *Thunderbolts*. The fact that it is structurally defined and repeatable is well demonstrated by what could be termed their "sibling" title, i.e. *Dark Avengers*.

The first 2009 series by Brian Michael Bendis and Mike Deodato Jr. was an extension of *Thunderbolts* written by Ellis (next to the series proper by Diggle). Here, the tested members of the Thunderbolts were enlisted in a new, official incarnation of the Avengers while the actual heroes remained in hiding

as outlaws. It was actually quite insightful to legitimize the move by revisiting the idea of the original Thunderbolts, whereby the villains would pretend to be the existing superheroes: Bullseye as Hawkeye, Venom as Spider-Man, Moonstone as Ms. Marvel, Norman Osborn as Iron Man with a patriotic twist (Iron Patriot). Additionally the team was joined by Marvel-Boy dissembling as Captain Marvel and Daken in Wolverine outfit, additionally underlining the usurpatory nature of the team; the only members to retain their identities were Ares and Sentry, former Avengers with a problematic past, who had been manipulated by Osborn.

The *Dark Avengers* series openly exploited the chronotope of the Thunderbolts, as it also relied on the motifs of reciprocal subterfuge, disloyalty and posing as superheroes (who did occasionally confront the threats that are typically found in superhero comics), but the series clearly lacked the vital motif of redemption; even the characters who display virtuous inclinations, such as Ares, Sentry, Marvel-Boy or Daken, are involved in the team for strictly selfish reasons and show no interest in going over to the "good" side. The tendency persists further, since even when due to decreasing sales the *Thunderbolts* series is renamed to *Dark Avengers* (though the numbering is retained)[49] and its protagonists are recruited from the second iteration of Osborn's Dark Avengers, their fates have little to do with how the Thunderbolts acted; they are simply villains who have been forcibly conscripted into the team and attempt to escape their overseers as soon as opportunity arises. Having been renamed, Parker's series essentially abandons the chronotope developed as its part; it is only recalled – albeit briefly – in 2016 in the comic books written by Jim Zub.

However that may be, we can still attempt to define the features of the superhero chronotope as it was formulated in T*hunderbolts*. To a fair extent, it is a variation on the elementary chronotope characteristics in the comic books about the Avengers, including in particular the doubled temporal relationships (not only in the represented world but also in reality, given that Avengers titles and *Thunderbolts* correspond with each other), as well as paraphrased spatial relationships (the Thunderbolts function in the same space as the Avengers, but perceive it from the other side, as it were). Within the chronotope's classic axes of conflict between the positive and the negative protagonists, the principal tensions are aligned to two motivations, the chief of which is seeking redemption (which is moderated by a "good" character and a positive example, Songbird in the main). The other is the pursuit of

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[49] In June 2012, the sales figures of *Dark Avengers* nearly doubled those of *Thunderbolts* for the preceding month, but in already in July the orders dropped to the regular numbers. Cf. J.J. Miller, *June 2012 Monthly Sales*, Comichron, https://comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/2012/2012-06.html [14.07.2020].

one's own, hidden interests (which entail concealing one's identity, agenda, or acting to the advantage of the enemy). The axes of redemption and the hidden interests resonate with one another, with an amplifying or weakening effect, leading to a potentially considerable diversity of plot solutions, whose recurrent application to various protagonists in the various incarnations of the team mitigates the impression of repetitiveness. The latter purpose is also served by the multiple and comprehensive reshuffles in the line-up; apart from Songbird, there is no single character who would be more or less permanently present in each iteration of the Thunderbolts and could be identified with the team.

It also seems that such a redemption-oriented chronotope delivers the best effects when there are characters at its centre who genuinely seek rehabilita- tion or whose striving to join the "good" ones may be interesting and compel- ling for the readers. Therefore, when Zub's series returned to the roots of the title and the original line-up, it proved a short-lived publishing undertaking, as there was little to tell in terms of redemption of the protagonists who have already given it a go several times. However, the Marvel universe does not suffer from a shortage of villains and it may only be a question of time until a subsequent incarnation of the Thunderbolts returns to the pages of comic books.[50]

Summary

The paper's primary focus is on narrative strategies, through which *The Thunderbolts* comics execute the motif of redemption, which – as author aims to argue – is almost impossible to accomplish in comic book media. To do so, the author employs the con- cept of "superhero chronotope," originally developed by Mikhail Bakhtin. The paper's secondary focus is to answer the question of which narrative means were used by *The Thunderbolts*'s creative teams to attempt to reconcile redemption efforts of the charac- ters – which have a potential of completely changing the initial *status quo* – with the petrified structure of the superhero chonotope.

Keywords: Marvel, Thunderbolts, chronotope, Bakhtin, superhero comics, redemption

Słowa kluczowe: Marvel, Thunderbolts, chronotop, Bachtin, komiks superbohaterski, odkupienie

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[50] Or on the screens, as every now and then one hears rumours that the team is finally about to have its fully-fledged debut as part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Cf. K. Outlaw, *Falcon and the Winter Soldier Reveals More Evidence That Marvel's Thunderbolts Are Coming to the MCU*, Comicbook.com, https://comicbook.com/marvel/news/falcon-winter-soldier-series- setting-up-marvel-thunderbolts-mcu/ [14.07.2020]. As it proven to be untrue, it does not stop similar rumors to flourish in regrd to future MCU's projects.

MICHAŁ SIROMSKI

STOWARZYSZENIE GILDIA SUPERBOHATERÓW

Supertherapy.
Analysis of the therapeutic and psychoeducational potential of the superhero stories

Superheroes have become a permanent feature in the landscape of contemporary popular culture. Their significance is not only attested by the box office records of motion pictures based on superhero franchises,[1] but also – or perhaps above all – by the power with which the fates of superheroes resonate in the minds of the audience. Fans around the world share the feelings of their favourite characters, empathize with their dilemmas, or discuss the decisions they have taken. What is more, they see them as a reflection of their own life's struggles and the vicissitudes they experience, even follow their example when coping with a particular difficult issue they happen to face.

Given the above, it is no wonder that the popular characters and superhero stories are taken advantage of as aids in the psychotherapeutic process, to help the clients function with greater ease, or in psychoeducation, as a means to increase client's social competence and enhance the understanding of the world around them. The concept of "superhero therapy" – involving both children and adults – gains popularity as rapidly as the costumed figures have done, assuming increasingly diverse forms. This paper is the first Polish study to attempt a broader appraisal the phenomenon, as it aims to discuss the reasons why superheroes may effectively support therapeutic efforts, analyse eligible themes and characters, as well as acquaint the reader with specific methods.

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[1] When this text was being written, the list of the most profitable motion pictures in the history of cinema included as many as twelve superhero productions, including Avengers: Endgame in the very first place; www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/top_lifetime_gross/?area=XWW [25.07.2020].

The transcultural dimension of superhero stories and the differences between the perceptions of such narratives among American and Polish readers are not addressed in this paper. The question is by no means irrelevant, yet it is not crucial enough to weigh significantly on the purport of this analysis. Despite efforts to the contrary, the advancing homogenization and Americanization of global popular culture[2] gradually blurs the intercultural differences in how popular content is perceived, which is why extrapolation of certain conclusions with respect to Polish audience seems legitimate. Even so, cultural disparities in therapy using superhero stories do deserve a separate analysis.

The precursor

Surprisingly enough, the idea to use superhero characters in therapy or psychological counselling is nearly as old as the superheroes themselves. Lauretta Bender, a pioneer in child psychiatry should be credited with being the precursor in the field. Her paper from 1941[3] (merely three years after Superman's debut) written jointly with Reginald Lourie, a senior resident under her supervision, contained four case studies of children treated at the Bellevue Hospital due to behavioural issues. One of the children, 12-year-old Tessie, witnessed the suicide of her father, a convicted murderer. After she had lost her mother to cancer, the girl began to call herself Shiera, the name she took from one of the female protagonists in the comic series *The Flash*. Shiera Sanders is saved by the Flash and Hawkman from the various trouble she happens to get into. Bender and Lourie concluded that reading superhero comics was a form of self-therapy for the girl, an attempt at dealing with her personal issues. The authors observed that "by identifying herself with the heroine who is always rescued from perilous situations, she temporarily achieved an escape from her own difficulties."

Another case was 11-year-old Kenneth, a boy who had spent most of his life with foster families and had also been victim to sexual abuse. Kenneth demonstrated violent behaviours, a constant sense of threat and a conviction that death awaited him wherever he turned. In an extraordinary manner, all that changed when he put on a Superman's cape. In those moments, he felt safe, believed that he could fly away at any time, and maintained that the cape protected him from a treacherous attack from the back.[4]

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[2] P. Siuda, *Homogenizacja i amerykanizacja globalnej popkultury*, "Kultura – Historia – Globalizacja" 10/2011, pp. 185–197.

[3] L. Bender, R. Lourie, *The effect of comic books on the ideology of children*, "American Journal of Orthopsychiatry" 11/1941, pp. 540–550.

[4] J. Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, New York 2014, p. 208.

In the subsequent years, Bender published several more texts dedicated to the impact of comic books (including superhero tales) on children. What is more, in 1942 she began to collaborate with DC Comics, developing psychological assessments of each published volume of *Wonder Woman*, *Superman* or *Batman*. When in 1954 the US Senate saw a hearing of the subcommittee for juvenile delinquency to examine allegations of negative influence on children and teenagers, Bender was invited by DC to testify in defence of comic books.[5]

Lauretta Bender was not uncritical towards contemporary popular culture and superhero comics, admitting that certain children may be provoked to delinquent behaviours by the experienced fantasies. She also spoke of the epidemic of bumps and bruises at her own institution, the Bellevue Hospital, after the children dressed in the Superman capes repeatedly jumped from the radiators pretending to be the famous superhero. She warned against Disney motion pictures, showing evidence that the distressing portrayals of mothers in the films can induce emotional issues and nightmares in children. Finally, it was on her advice that the National Comics Publications abandoned the idea to market superhero outfits for children.[6]

At the same time, Bender opposed the view that comics cause aggression in children. She argued the contrary, namely that comic books may provide children with "a means of relief from conflict, confusion, frustration, anxiety, and may prove also to be a vicarious release of aggression." Combining psychodynamic theory with gestalt psychology, Bender believed that children do not passively follow the sequence of comic images but display an extraordinary capacity for selecting the material and picking those elements which could help them in the process of growing up, coping with aggressive impulses, comprehending various situations in life or in moulding one's own self.[7]

The sources of the therapeutic potential in superheroes

There are a number of reasons why the figures of heroes endowed with superhuman powers are applicable to the therapeutic process. First, the characters have become tremendously popular and recognizable, particularly in the two recent decades, which is largely due to the ubiquitous presence. For instance,

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[5] D. Kritsotaki, V. Long, M. Smith (eds.), *Preventing Mental Illness. Past, Presence and Future*, London 2019, p. 46.

[6] J.S. Lawrence, *Foreword*, in: L.C. Rubin, *Using Superheroes in Counseling and Play Therapy*, New York 2007, p. xxiv.

[7] D. Kritsotaki, V. Long, M. Smith (eds.), *Preventing Mental Illness...*, p. 47.

in 2016 alone saw the release of eight high-budget movie productions, 24 televisions shows, as well as 5 computer games for different platforms.[8] On top of that, there are several hundred comic series (usually published on a monthly basis), countless items of merchandise (clothing, household products, stationery, posters, costumes, vitamins, cereal) that exploit the popularity of individual brands, not to mention the immeasurable deluge of internet memes. Such an extensive exposure translates into high recognition of particular characters and elements of their mythology. The probability that a client starting a therapy (whether a child or an adult) is a superhero enthusiast is considerably greater than at any time before. What is more, they may not be a fan, but they are still certain to know the most popular superheroes and the essential elements of the superhero myth, even if they have never read a single comic.

Second, the popularity of superheroes is a phenomenon which brings generations together. The multiplicity of what we know as fields of exploitation causes persons of all ages to be attracted to superheroes: from several-year-old children, through older children, adolescents to adults. Naturally, each of the age groups engages with superhero stories at a different levels and in varied forms. The youngest enthusiasts of the DC will watch the animated series *Teen Titans Go!*, play with the figures and go-to-sleep 5-minute stories about Batman. An adult fan is likely to but the exclusive editions from the DC Black Label imprint, go to the cinema and invest in costly gadgets for the discerning collector. In either case, they will be attached to the same characters and the same universe with its characteristic elements. Consequently, superhero stories become myths that are shared by different generations and therefore enable a common plane of understanding to emerge. Thus, adult and child enthusiasts of superheroes may easily relate to one another and establish common meanings of certain notions, which is a prerequisite in any educational or therapeutic interaction.

Third, superheroes are exceedingly colourful characters, also in the visual sense. They wear impressive, vividly coloured outfits, and possess their singular, memorable powers or elements of mythology. As a result, they powerfully stimulate imagination, one of the key resources used in psychotherapy, self-development or mental recovery. As Lawrence C. Rubin, aptly observes, imagination is "the place in which children and adults escape from but also make sense of their worlds by creating and then living their stories – their own personal mythologies."[9]

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[8] J. MacFarlane, *The Influence of Superhero Comic Books on Adult Altruism*, Lawrenceville 2016, p. 3.

[9] L.C. Rubin, *Introduction: Look, Up the Sky! An Introduction the Use of Superheroes Psychotherapy*, in: L.C. Rubin, *Using Superheroes…*, p. 4.

For children in particular, the therapeutic significance of such fantasies is nothing short of tremendous. Based on her experience in working with children, Patty Scanlon goes as far as calling superheroes "cotherapeutists":

> Incorporating children's favorite superhero into their play therapy seemed natural. Sad Sarah smiled with Dora's encouragement. Shy Sam transformed into Sociable Sam with Superman's friendly assistance. Yes, superheroes provide comfort and rescue when needed. Superheroes can teach essential skills. Superheroes are best friends. All that's required is imagination.[10]

It may be noted that reading comic books – about superheroes for instance – stimulates the limbic system, the part of the brain responsible for recognizing and regulating emotions. It is the limbic system which perceives facial expressions, the tone of voice and other elements of the body language. The comic's characteristic exaggeration provides the characters with overexpressive traits, thus enhancing brain stimulation and, in consequence, easier formation of an effective system of assessing environmental input and triggering appropriate emotional states and resulting behaviours. This is vital insofar as trauma (e.g. caused by the loss of one's parents) affects the child's brain, impairing its normal functioning. Exposure to superheroes, either with the therapist's support or spontaneously, may improve healthy performance in that area of the brain.[11]

Fourth, superheroes in their original versions (especially from the Golden Age of comic books, i.e. 1938–1956) are very straightforward, black-and-white characters who fight evil without being entangled in political issues or the nuances of the complex reality.

> In denying the ambivalence and complexity of real life, where the moral landscape offers choices in various shades of gray rather than in black and white [the superhero myth] gives Americans a fantasy land without ambiguities to cloud moral vision, where the evil empire of enemies is readily discernible, and where they can vicariously (through identification with the superhero) smite evil before it overtakes them.[12]

In such an approach, superheroes elicit unequivocally good connotations, being linked to such positive notions as hope, rescue, safety, or trust. Hence, on the one hand, they may accompany the client as psychological support in

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[10] P. Scanlon, *Superheroes Are Super Friends: Developing Social Skills and Emotional Reciprocity With Autism Spectrum Clients*, in: L.C. Rubin, *Using Superheroes...*, p. 172.

[11] C. Wenger, *Superheroes in Play Therapy With an Attachment Disordered Child*, in: L.C. Rubin, *Using Superheroes...*, p. 195.

[12] J.S. Lawrence, R. Jewett, *The myth of the American superhero*, Cambridge, 2002, p. 48, after: L.C. Rubin, *Introduction: Look, Up the Sky!...*, p. 9.

their daily struggles, ensuring a source of a sense of safety. On the other, they constitute ideal metaphors enabling internalization of various concepts, such as justice, courage, or sacrifice.

Fifth, since the 1970s, the superhero comic has evolved towards greater realism and more ambiguous portrayals of the superheroes who in fact face life's various problems and confront mental issues. The superhero myth inherently involves an internal struggle, psychological conflict or trauma. It may be the death of a loved one, a tragic accident which changes one's functioning forever or a spectacular failure in life. Superheroes invariably have to hide their identity and pretend that they are ordinary people. Consequently, they are fated to living whilst being permanently torn between two parallel existences and in constant fear that someone may uncover their secret and use it against them. A crisis of identity looms in the long term, as the protagonist begins to doubt who they really are. Finally, superheroes often experience dramatic situations in which they are subject to tremendous pressure. Not infrequently, the circumstances compel them take difficult decisions (where the life of many people or even the existence of the world may be at stake) or sacrifice their own lives to save others. As can be seen, numerous motifs do reflect the actual experience of the potential clients of psychotherapists. Morris and Morris observe as follows:

> The best superhero comics, in addition to being tremendously entertaining, introduce and treat in vivid ways some of the most interesting and important questions facing all human beings – questions regarding ethics, personal and social responsibility, justice, crime and punishment, the mind and human emotions, personal identity, the soul, the notion of destiny, the meaning of our lives, how we think about science and nature, the role of faith in the rough and tumble of this world, the importance of friendship, what love really means, the nature of family, the classic virtues like courage […] determination, persistence, teamwork and creativity.[13]

Sixth, superheroes are the embodiment of the fantasies about omnipotence and meting out justice, which are perfectly natural with children and adults alike. Every individual is likely to have experienced injustice, ill-treatment or downright harm. In such circumstances, one likes to imagine being able to fly away from an embarrassing situation like Superman, keep one's composure like Batman, or exact cruel vengeance on the tormentors like Punisher. Fantasies of the kind diminish the stress occasioned by a difficult situation, allow one to cope with the sense of injustice and quieten negative emotions. For this

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[13] T. Morris, M. Morris (eds.), *Superheroes and philosophy: Truth, justice, and the Socratic Way*, La Salle 2005, pp. xi, 17, after: L.C. Rubin, *Introduction: Look, Up the Sky!…*, p. 17.

reason, persons who are affected by the sense of having been harmed, rejected or alienated relate particularly well to the vicissitudes of superheroes. On the other hand, superheroes epitomize strength and victory, by virtue of which they dovetail with the emotional needs of children who, identifying with the superhero figures may feel "more" than they are: someone above the limitations imposed by the reality in which they are usually subordinated to their parents, elder siblings, or nursery teachers. Jones argues as follows:

> [...] being something; superheroes, monsters, army men [...] can nourish those fantasies. They provide symbols of power – powerful feelings they can "become" – that their usual experiences cannot [...] especially at around age four or five, as children become more conscious of themselves as individual, trademarked superheroes can be the perfect surrogate selves.[14]

In addition, superheroes often qualify as outsiders, acting on their own beyond the boundaries of the system, sometimes transgressing social norms or the ineffective law, even tend to receive no acceptance from the people for whose benefit they act. Unlike the classic hero who – once their adventure is over – returns to a harmonious existence in a community, the superhero will never be integrated with the society and constantly confronts irreconcilable tension, within themselves and within their social surroundings.[15] Therefore, enthusiasts of superheroes are often encountered among those who consider themselves loners, who live with a sense of being different, experience lack of acceptance or even violence from their environment. It is not a seldom occurrence that such persons eventually turn or are referred to psychotherapists for help.

Seventh, double identity is a characteristic trait of superheroes. A typical superhero performs their heroic deeds dressed in a colourful outfit and under a catchy alias. Simultaneously, they function as an ordinary person who goes to work each day, has a family and faces the typical problems of everyday life while concealing who they truly are. Very often, the identities are antithetical; take the mighty, charismatic Superman and the gawkish Clark Kent. That duality can be recognized as their own by many clients undergoing psychotherapy, as they equally often have to hide who they are (e.g. having different sexual preferences) or what they have experienced (e.g. sexual abuse as a child).

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[14] G. Jones, *Killing monsters: Why children need fantasy, superheroes and make-believe violence*, New York 2002, p. 70, after: H. Livesay, *Making a Place for the Angry Hero on the Team*, in: L.C. Rubin, *Using Superheroes...*, p. 127.

[15] L.C. Rubin, *Introduction: Look, Up the Sky!...*, p. 8.

What is more, that duality is crucial in therapy, and can be taken advantage of in three ways: the motif of the transformation from an ordinary persons into a superhero may be a metaphor for hiding one's weaknesses under a costume or enable envisioning future change into someone stronger and free from the current psychological issues. Most of all, however, it may reflect one of the principal processes in psychotherapy, which consists in integrating various elements of one's personality into a lasting, balanced structure that will be resistant to life's various shocks. Superheroes may inspire that process, since they become genuine heroes the moment they manage to fuse the opposing elements of their identity into one cohesive whole. Batman and Bruce Wayne offer a splendid example: two identities of one person, which collaborate effectively in the crusade against crime. The former operates in the field, undertaking various dangerous missions, while the latter ensures financial and technological support for the superhero, provides an alibi, as well as acts where Batman cannot be in evidence.

Theoretical framework for the therapeutic application of superheroes

The theoretical foundations of employing superheroes in therapy are discussed by Lawrence C. Rubin.[16] The theories in question are primarily concerned with using imagination in child's play. From the cognitive standpoint, engaging imagination is associated with the child's ability to internalize experiences as well as develop a comprehension of the world and improve their competences. According to Jean Piaget, symbolic play supplies the child with an individual idiom through which they can convey subjective feelings. Similarly, Erik Erikson, the originator of the theory of psychosocial development, argued that fantasy enables the child to be liberated from the limitations of reality and experiment with various constructs, such as bodily constraints, temporal boundaries, causality, or identity. J.K. Sawyer and D.M. Horn-Wingerd suggested that just as object-focused (sensorimotor) play allows children to examine the properties of the physical world around them, object-detached play (symbolic-representational) facilitates learning social interaction and problem solving.

To Lew Vygotsky, fantasy play was an instrument enabling the child to understand their reality, limitations and abilities, as well as a stage in which they can freely experiment with issues that transcend their current intellectual capacity and experience. In a sense, the child acts older than their actual

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[16] Ibidem, pp. 4–7.

age and the competences they may have. In the context of superheroes, a child introduced into their stories may develop by discovering domains, rules, and concepts beyond their current comprehension, such as strength, justice, or morality. In turn, Jerome Bruner underscores the social context of play. In his opinion imagination-mediated play is a form of solving a problem with the added benefit of pleasure due to the presence of a partner or attentive observer, while "imagination begin[s] in the form of dialogue with a partner."

Sigmund Freud asserted that when playing, a child imitates everything they have been impressed by in real life and, in doing so, reflects the strength of that impression, while making themselves the master of the situation. At the same time, he was convinced that play reduced the tensions experienced by the child as they re-enacted the disagreeable situation and imparted new symbolic elements to it. When repeated, the action would mitigate troublesome emotions and enable a cathartic experience.[17] Anna Freud conjectured that play which relies on imagination offers a way to address intrapsychic conflicts and a form of regression that fosters psychological development. However, it is also an externalized drama which, albeit anchored in the present, enables the child to revisit past situations and problems, as well as opens a path for a journey towards future possibilities. It may be worthwhile to note that Anna Freud was the first to employ play for therapeutic purposes; it consisted in allowing the child to play freely to analyze the meaning of what they did and, cautiously and gradually, lead the child to discover that meaning so some part of the psychological tensions might be revealed to them.[18]

For Donald Woods Winnicott, on the other hand, play is an important opportunity for getting in touch – in symbolic terms – with the inner and external worlds as domains of expressing oneself and communication with others.[19]

What fantasy is for a child, the metaphor is for the adult. When a child is playing, a block may be a car, a plush animal a wild predator, and a plastic figure can morph into a superhero of flesh and blood, affording new perceptions of reality. Likewise, for an adult struggling with a disorder, a crisis of identity or an unsatisfactory relationship, a felicitous metaphor of that struggle may expand the view of the problem and reveal more alternative solutions.[20] Using superhero themes, both children and adults attending therapeutic sessions may work though past crises, express current problems, experience a catharsis, externalized desires, and finally arrive at solutions.[21]

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[17] W. Okoń, *Zabawa a rzeczywistość*, Warsaw 1987, pp. 77–78.
[18] Ibidem, p. 86.
[19] Ibidem, p. 84.
[20] L.C. Rubin, *Introduction: Look, Up the Sky!...*, p. 6.
[21] Ibidem, p. 16.

The effectiveness of using superheroes in child counselling is supported by the findings of Petera Fonagy within the paradigm of the attachment theory. Fonagy formulated the notion of mentalization, denoting a process thanks to which the child realizes that the mind mediates in the experience of the world. Mentalization constitutes the basis of reflective thought, facilitates understanding the nature of the various states of mind in oneself and in other persons, and therefore provides the underpinning of vital skills: the ability to comprehend and predict the behaviours of others as well as to deal with the aftermath of a distressing experience.

According to Fonagy, in order to acquire the skill of mentalization, a child has to go through a stage of psychic "equivalence" mode (in which the inner world is rendered equivalent to the external world: the child does not distinguish between their convictions and reality) and a phase of the "pretend" mode (in which the inner world is separated from the external world). In the latter phase, that which the child imagines actually exists, while what they do not notice does not exist instead. During that phase, a child impersonating a superhero becomes one indeed, while the adventures it experiences are as real as those the child has had in the real world. Hence the ease of internalizing various attitudes and behaviour patterns of the superheroes. Having passed that stage correctly, the child can activate the third phase involving a reflective mode in which the two earlier models are integrated. At that point, the external world is neither wholly equated with the inner reality, not is it fully separated from it. The child grasps the dependency between those two planes and can therefore more successfully confront potential difficulties.[22]

The therapeutic and educational potential of motifs and characters

Since the superheroes are exceedingly diverse, their stories offer a wealth of themes which may be applied in the therapeutic and psychoeducational context. A substantial proportion of clients in counselling struggle with a range of traumatic experiences. Trauma is also a greatly characteristic component of numerous superhero biographies; often enough, it is the moment which triggers the formation of a superhero identity. For instance, when Peter Parker is bitten by a radioactive spider and thus gains superhuman powers, he decides to use them for his own benefit. Under the ring name of Spider-Man, he enters wrestling fights to earn money by defeating successive opponents. However,

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[22] D.J. Wallin, *Przywiązanie w psychoterapii*, transl. M. Cierpisz, Cracow 2011, pp. 53–57.

his somewhat reckless ways lead to his beloved uncle Ben (Parker's foster father and father figure in one) being killed, which is a profound psychological shock. He realizes that he has to change his life, and use his superhuman abilities to do good for others as opposed to pursuing selfish interests.

The character of Bruce Wayne, or Batman, is an exceptional example of overcoming trauma. It speaks in particular to the imagination of children, perhaps because the traumatic moment takes place precisely in his childhood. The several-year-old Bruce witnesses the murder of his parents in a street mugging attempt. The boy survives only because the attacker is scared away.

Despairing and anguished, Wayne experiences the loss of the essential sense of security, and the entire world seems hostile and threatening. In addition, Bruce is burdened by the so-called death guilt,[23] which is observed in persons who have survived an accident, a shooting or the Holocaust, for instance. The survivor is affected by constant pangs of conscience that they have survived while the others died. Often enough, they believe that they could have done something to save others, or that they survived thanks to the death of someone else. This is the case with Bruce, who for a long time struggles with the self-reproach that he should have saved his parents, and the notion that he survived because the murderer merely did not have enough time to kill him as well. Consequently, he lives because the moments needed to murder him were used to take the lives of his parents.

However, Bruce uses his anger, anguish and fear to effect a sublimation, a process consisting in a shift of the negative, unacceptable impulses towards a positive action with high social value.[24] The difficult emotions become the driving force to train the mind and the body in order to prepare for the role of a merciless and effective defender of the victims of crime. He learns to master his impulses so as never to lose his self-possession and think creatively in the most dramatic of circumstances, being focused on his goal. Thus, he not only surmounts the aftermath of the trauma but also transforms into a superhero, recovering the sense of safety he lost in such a painful way, though he does not regain it for himself only, but also for all other residents of Gotham.

He does even more, using the likeness of a bat to strike fear among the criminals, as bats scared him once as a child to the extent that in his mind the animal became the epitome of the most overwhelming fear one can imagine. By placing the bat emblem on his chest, he symbolically tames the fear and masters it, harnessing it in the service of his mission.

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[23] M. Brody, *Holy Franchise! Batman and Trauma*, in: L.C. Rubin, *Using Superheroes…*, pp. 108–109.

[24] Cf. J. Laplanche, J.-B. Pontalis, *Słownik psychoanalizy*, transl. E. Modzelewska, E. Wojciechowska, Warsaw 1996, p. 313.

All those themes are ideally suited to be employed in therapy with children and adults who have experienced trauma. It may be noted that Batman has no extraordinary powers, and achieves everything thanks to hard work, discipline, and intellect. Consequently, he is easier to identify with than other superheroes. The story of Dean Trippe, who had been raped as a boy, is a testimony to the great therapeutic value of the Batman tale. Dean battled with the psychological fallout of the event for years, in which the figure of Batman he find out about three years later proved very helpful. It was from the Dark Knight that Dean began to learn how to handle trauma and its upshots. As an adult, Trippe himself became an artist and created an autobiographical comic books *Something Terrible*, a narrative of the harrowing events. As the author writes in the afterword, he understood thanks to Batman that our identity is not moulded by what happens to us but by what we decide to do about it.

> I was in the darkness. The story of Batman helped me realize I could wrap it around my arms like a security blanket. Or a cape. The yellow symbol on my chest was my light defended my a black creature more powerful than anything crime could throw at me. A creature of the night, something terrible. A bat. And eventually, I brought Batman to our world in a story, and somehow it really did change my story.[25]

Other instances of therapeutic application of the Batman story are described by Michael Brody.[26]

The figure of the Dark Knight can indeed have a range of beneficial uses, for instance as a model of self-development, search for one's identity and transition through successive stages of development. Brody observes thus:

> Batman gives instructions on how to overcome limitations and adversity by hard work and mental discipline. No superhero special powers are needed, just a Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods work ethic, as well as a firm grasp of technology, athletic skills, and strong sense of purpose.[27]

Cory A. Nelson notes that a client who has experienced trauma – particularly those with a powerful need to be revenged on the person (or persons) who harmed them – may strongly identify with the character of Frank Castle, or Punisher.[28] The origins of Punisher are not unlike those of Batman's. During a family picnic the Castles inadvertently find themselves in the middle of a shoot-out between rival gangs. Frank's wife and children are killed before

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[25] D. Trippe, *Something Terrible*, Dean Trippe 2013. Published by the author.
[26] M. Brody, *Holy Franchise…*, pp. 105–120.
[27] Ibidem, p. 116.
[28] C.A. Nelson, *What Would Superman Do?*, in: L.C. Rubin, *Using Superheroes…*, pp. 54–55.

his eyes; he himself is grievously injured but survives. After a lengthy recovery Castle decides to use his skills and military expertise to seek retribution on the killers.[29] However, following the bloody vendetta he does not return to normal life but carries on with the revenge, extending it to all possible criminals. Punisher acts ruthlessly, often resorting to cruelty and readily breaking the law, which makes him a criminal in the eyes of many other heroes in the Marvel universe. In fact, the sole thing which sets him apart from his victims is that he kills only evil people.

Punisher may be used in therapy as a pattern of negative adaptation to trauma and an example of how vengeance, the need to reciprocate harm (even if just and justified) does not lead to overcoming the effects of the trauma but, on the contrary, may make one permanently miserable. Punisher lives a lonely life constantly tormented by what happened, still feels anguish and anger it provoked and these emotions fuel the subsequent brutal acts.

Another character likely to be used in trauma therapy is Matt Murdock, or Daredevil, whose life has been marked by multiple harrowing events. Brought up without a mother, he was bullied by his peers, lost sight in an accident and, as if it were not enough, his father was killed by gangsters.[30] He becomes a superhero as an adult and pays a greatly painful price for his activities. He has to see two of his loved women die (Elektra Natchios[31] and Karen Page[32]), while the third (Milla Donovan) goes insane following the machinations of one of the villains.[33] As a result of the revenge of his arch-enemy, his life seems to lie shattered in ruins at some point (he loses his job, money, home and nearly his life)[34]; on another occasion, his true identity is exposed and he becomes victim to a media witch-hunt, is pursued by the FBI and ends up in prison.[35] Each of the events should be considered a major trauma, but Murdock manages to recover from each, regain psychological balance and continue his war against evil.

On the other hand, the story of Jessica Jones offers an extremely vivid depiction of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by sexual assault. In the comic book series *Alias*,[36] the protagonist displays almost all typical symp-

[29] D. Abnett, A. Lanning, D. Eaglesham, *The Punisher: Rok Pierwszy*, Warsaw 1996.

[30] F. Miller, J. Romita Jr., *Daredevil: Człowiek nieznający strachu*, transl. S. Smolarek, Warsaw 2017.

[31] F. Miller, *Daredevil*, vol. 2, transl. M. Szpak, Warsaw 2019.

[32] K. Smith, J. Quesada, *Daredevil: Diabeł Stróż*, transl. M. Drewnowski, Warsaw 2014.

[33] E. Brubaker, M. Lark, P. Azaceta, *Daredevil. Nieustraszony!*, vol. 5, transl. M. Szpak, Warsaw 2018.

[34] F. Miller, D. Mazzucchelli, *Daredevil: Odrodzony*, transl. R. Lipski, Warsaw 2013.

[35] B.M. Bendis, A. Maleev, *Daredevil: Nieustraszony!*, vol. 1, transl. M. Szpak, Warsaw 2017.

[36] B.M. Bendis, M. Gaydos, *Jessica Jones: Alias*, vol. 1–4, transl. M. Starosta, Warsaw 2016–2017.

toms: persistent reliving of the trauma in the recurring, distressing dreams; intense anxiety provoked by stimuli which symbolize the traumatic event, obstinate avoidance of the trauma-related triggers, limited emotional range and a proclivity for violent outbursts.[37] The reader more readily grasps the mechanisms of PTSD and sees an inspiring example of a woman who proves able to overcome the aftermath of the trauma.

Another frequently encountered motif in superhero tales is loss of parents and adoption. Being deprived of parents is one of the most common factors which impair the development of attachment, resulting in a number of psychological issues. Adopted children often have a different understanding of how a family functions, as well as perceive community and care in a distinct fashion. Such children feel a profound need to be ensured familial constancy and tend to be affected by anxiety that the new parents will leave them or die; in short, their need of safety is considerably increased.[38]

Motifs of the kind are found in the life stories of Superman (an alien who is adopted as an infant by a childless farmer couple[39]), Spider-Man (whose parents – CIA agents – die in an attack, while their son is cared for by Ben and May Parker, his aunt and uncle[40]), Daredevil (his mother, suffering from mental issues and postnatal depression, abandons her family and becomes a nun,[41] the father is murdered by gangsters), Aquaman (the issue of an interracial relationship of a human male and a female of the underwater race of Atlanteans[42]), Storm (when she is six, her parents are killed in an air raid on Cairo during the so-called Suez crisis, while she is buried under the ruins of a hotel, developing claustrophobia as a result; she lives as an orphan in the streets, becoming a talented thief[43]), or the aforementioned Batman. The stories of those superheroes may help a child understand their emotions associated with the parents they have lost, and believe that the loss is not the end of their world. For the above superheroes, the loss of parents is the first of the

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[37] M. Siromski, *Superbohaterka po traumie. Przypadek Jessiki Jones*, "Zeszyty Komiksowe" 29/2020, pp. 19–27.

[38] D.D. Gray, *Adopcja i przywiązanie. Praktyczny poradnik dla rodziców*, transl. M. Lipińska, M. Kowalska, S. Kot, Sopot 2010, p. 19.

[39] J. Byrne, *Superman: Człowiek ze stali*, transl. M. Starosta, Warsaw 2017.

[40] S. Lee, L. Lieber, *The Parents of Peter Parker!*, "Amazing Spider-Man Annual" vol. 1, 5/1968.

[41] M. Waid, J. Rodriguez, *Daredevil*, vol. 4, 7/2014.

[42] R. Bernstein, R. Fradon, *How Aquaman Got His Powers!*, "Adventure Comics" vol. 1, 260/1959.

[43] Ch. Claremont, D. Cockrum, *Who Will Stop the Juggernaut?*, "Uncanny X-Men" vol. 1, 102/1976.

many adversities they will have to confront, and at the same it is a foundation on which their superhero personality will be built.[44]

Again, Batman's case appears particularly applicable, as it may be treated as an example of blocking the process of mourning in a child. The mind becomes fixated on the painful scene of the parents' death which, constantly replayed in the memory, generates powerful emotions of anger or despair. This arrests the natural progression of mourning and grief, in that it sustains the alternating moments of approaching the acknowledgement of loss and avoidance of the agonizing awareness of what happened.[45] The attitude of Alfred, who accompanied little Bruce in the process, his caring attention, the stability of the surroundings he ensured and the fact that Bruce was able to manifest painful emotions around him, made it possible to eliminate that block, work through the loss and ultimately mould the superhero personality.

A characteristic problem experienced by children in adoptive families is being detached from their biological roots and the resulting sense of losing a part of oneself. This often brings about the need to find and establish contact with the biological parents, which as the child believes would give them an answer who they really are. The situation is very aptly portrayed in the film *Shazam*,[46] whose main protagonist Billy Batson, a 14-year-old orphan, runs away from each successive foster family to find his biological mother from which he was suddenly separated 10 years previously. Finally, he manages to find her, but the encounter he has been looking forward to so much is a disappointment, as it turns out that the mother abandoned him deliberately, convinced that she would be unable to bring him up on her own. The closing message is clear: looking for one's biological roots may be important, but its significance should not be overestimated. Instead of focusing all one's effort on such a goal, it may be worthwhile to channel it into building a relationship with the family with whom one is now. It is there that one can experience true love and genuine support, which will be invaluable in the struggles of everyday life and in superhero activities. *Shazam* therefore provides excellent material which could be used in counselling adoptive children.

The above stories may not only help a child deal with the consequences of losing their parents, but can also inspire their new foster or adoptive parents. The characters of Martha and Jonathan Kent (Superman's caretakers), May and Ben Parker (Peter Parker's foster parents), the Vasquez family (foster parents of Billy Batson's) or Alfred Pennyworth (who alone raised Bruce Wayne) may successfully serve as model of how to create a loving and accepting re-

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[44] L.C. Rubin, *Introduction: Look, Up the Sky!...*, p. 9.
[45] D. Gray, *Adopcja i przywiązanie...*, p. 77.
[46] *Shazam!*, dir. D.F. Sandberg, USA 2019.

lationship with the adopted child, a relationship that enables them to address inner tensions, regain the sense of safety and develop trusting attachment. Those caretakers responded splendidly to the challenges that adoptive parents face: teaching children what a family is, ensuring them safety, and imposing the necessary limitations, as well as reducing anxiety.[47]

The most difficult of emotions, namely anger, is a frequently recurring motif in superhero comic books. Anger represents a response to frustration and the sense of injustice, whether suffered from others (as with Batman or Punisher), or caused by an accident (Daredevil, The Thing) or variously construed fate (Wolverine, Hulk). The characters and their emotions are particularly relatable for the boys who feel anger stemming from traumatic experience, living in dysfunctional families, poverty or simply because of the label of being a "difficult child."[48]

The figure of Hulk is especially suited as a pretext to discuss anger. As a child, Bruce Banner had to bear the violent behaviour of his father, while the absence of healthy family relationships and social isolation deprived him of the opportunity to learn how to express his emotions effectively. Becoming an outstanding physicist as an adult he conducts pioneering research on gamma radiation and one day, due to sabotage, he is exposed to the effects of a gamma bomb, which transforms his body into the monstrous Hulk.[49] From that moment onwards, he leads a double life: usually an apprehensive scientist who lack self-confidence, but a surge of anger brings on the Hulk, a giant, green and not a particularly intelligent beast who destroys everything within reach. Importantly, Banner is not aware whence the anger originates, therefore Hulk is a kind of personification of the suppressed emotions rooted in the painful childhood memories he had repressed. Both personalities exist in one individual, hating each other: Hulk despises the "weakling Banner," whereas Banner is terrified by the destruction caused by Hulk, living with a constant sense of guilt for what his green alter ego has done. It is only with time that Banner learns the techniques of accepting and controlling problematic emotions.

Hulk is immensely popular with small children, probably because of his grotesque appearance, the tremendous strength thanks to which he always wins, and the tendency to smash everything around in his frenzy. Consequently, Hulk's adventures can be readily used to explain to a child how to recognize anger and outline its nature: what it is characterized by, where it originates from and what social consequences it may have. A child can also be

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[47] D. Gray, *Adopcja i przywiązanie…*, pp. 43–55.
[48] H. Livesay, *Making a Place for the Angry Hero on the Team*, in: L.C. Rubin, *Using Superheroes…*, p. 121.
[49] S. Lee, J. Kirby, *The Hulk*, „Incredible Hulk" vol. 1, 1/1962.

taught to verbalize anger and unblock the access to the thoughts and feelings they are unconscious of. With slightly older clients, the character may serve to transition from yielding to strong, uncontrolled emotions, loss of control and incapacity to receive information to adaptive use of emotions as a symptom of unfulfilled needs or a tool to resolve difficult situations. Examples of such applications of the character of Hulk are presented e.g. by Jennifer Mendoza Sayers.[50]

Another distinctive element of the superhero myth which carries substantial therapeutic value is the motif of the superteam. Next to solo adventures, superheroes join forces in teams such as the Avengers, X-Men or the League of Justice. The cooperation builds strong mutual ties as they learn to respect their differences, take care of one another, and achieve a synergy of skills to accomplish goals beyond the reach of one superhero alone. In fact, the superteam often performs the role of a family[51] and may prove useful in child or adolescent counselling precisely as a metaphor of a family. It may be noted that superteams include powerful individualities (Batman, Iron Man), who are difficult to collaborate with, those who barely control their emotions and behaviours (Hulk, Wolverine) or even distanced aliens (Martian Manhunter, Thor). This also eloquently shows that persons perceiving themselves as outsiders and finding little acceptance with others can have a place in a group and successfully play an important role as its member.

Similar overtones may be discerned even in the more serious, revisionist comic books such as *Authority*,[52] where the protagonists argue with one another, get involved in romantic affairs, show anger or jealousy or fight their inner demons, but still unite in the crucial moments for the sake of a common goal.

Fighting adversaries is an essential element of the superhero myth. Numerous superheroes (e.g. Batman or Spider-Man) boast a plethora of colourful arch-enemies. Similarly, clients are often engaged in a bitter struggle of inner conflicts (between contradictory aspirations or feelings), external issues (confronting social norms in their immediate surroundings), or interpersonal problems (involving a school bully, violent spouse or a toxic superior at work). The metaphor of contest between the superhero and their arch-enemy promotes externalization and understanding of the mechanism underlying the

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[50] J.M. Sayers, *The Incredible Hulk and Emotional Literacy*, in: L.C. Rubin, *Using Superheroes...*, pp. 89–100.

[51] For instance, Batman's associates are often referred in the comic books as the "Bat Family."

[52] W. Ellis, B. Hitch, *Authority*, vol. 1–4, Wrocław 2007–2008.

conflict, as well as the associated emotions. At times, it may reveal a conflict of which the client themselves may be unaware.

However, superheroes do not go up against supervillains exclusively, but more broadly combat evil. Only ostensibly is this merely straightforward question of choosing between black and white, In the contemporary stories, superheroes have to make many difficult, ambiguous decisions, when they are faced with choice between greater and lesser evil, while the consequences of what they opt for may be dramatic. Such stories can be used to delve into ethics and philosophy. For instance, the dilemma whether Batman should kill Joker offers grounds to discuss the ends and means to achieve them, as well as to introduce the ethical notions of utilitarianism and deontologism.[53] The plot of the comic book *Civil War*[54] or the motion picture entitled *Captain America: Civil War*[55] (a loose adaptation of themes in the comic) may serve to consider predicting the consequences of one's actions and taking responsibility, not to mention the perennial quandary of the boundaries between the need of freedom on the one hand and security on the other.[56]

Given the therapeutic perspective, the transformation of the supervillains into superheroes is a greatly compelling theme. Numerous current superheroes were originally created as villains, including Black Widow, Hawkeye, Punisher, Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch, Harley Quinn or Clayface. However, each went through a process of moral conversion and some won such a popularity that they became a part of the cinematic or television universes of Marvel or DC. There are even supergroups such as the Suicide Squad or the Thunderbolts, all composed of reformed supervillains whose extraordinary powers are used to do good. Their particular stories may prove useful when counselling children or adolescents described as "difficult," "naughty" or "bad." Conscious of the label attached to them, the children may feel that the only way to proceed is to behave accordingly. The above superheroes may help the child realize that a transformation from a "bad boy" into a superhero is by all means feasible. All one needs is inner resolve and consistency of action.

Superheroes also provide an ideal basis to explore attachment styles. Bowlby's attachment theory is one of the foremost paradigms in contemporary psychology, which effectively accounts for numerous problems experi-

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[53] Cf. M.D. White, *Dlaczego Batman nie zabija Jokera?*, in: M.D. White, R. Arp (eds.), *Batman i filozofia. Mroczny Rycerz nareszcie bez maski*, transl. O. Kwiecień-Maniewska, Gliwice 2013, pp. 15–26.

[54] M. Millar, S. McNiven, *Wojna domowa*, transl. T. Sidorkiewicz, Warsaw 2017.

[55] *Kapitan Ameryka: Wojna bohaterów*, dir. A. Russo, J. Russo, USA 2016.

[56] Cf. N. Miczo, *How Superheroes Model Community: Philosophically, Communicatively, Relationally*, Maryland 2016, pp. 17–34.

enced by children and adults alike. The theory relies on the core premise that one's personality and their life – relationships with others in particular – are crucially influenced by the nature of attachment relations which developed in one's childhood. Specifically, the fact whether the mother is able to respond adequately to the needs of the child and ensure them a sense of safety has a critical impact on further development and the ability to build relationships in adult life.[57]

The typology of attachment styles in adults by Cindy Hazan and Philip Shaver distinguishes three such styles.[58] Superman may be an example of the secure style, having experienced love, tenderness and attention from his adoptive parents as a child. Martha and Jonathan created a sense of safety in him, responded to his needs and helped him to know the world and himself. They taught him to express emotions and solve problems, as well as were there to support him in the difficult moments. Consequently, the adult Clark is a trusting person with a sense of his own worth, capable of establishing bonds and lasting relationships. He knows that he is loved and can genuinely love and care for others, also having much empathy. Above all, however, he has that profound inner conviction that the world is a valuable place, that people are good by nature and deserve to be helped, which is why he decided to employ his superhuman capabilities as a force of good.

Selina Kyle (or Catwoman) represents the anxious-resistant style. Her ill mother was distanced and preferred to spend time with cats rather than her daughters. When she committed suicide, Selina's father sank into alcoholism, tormenting Selina for her resemblance to the mother. When Brian Kyle drank himself to death, Selina ended up in an orphanage where she experienced more violence. Finally, she ran away from the institution to begin a life in the streets, becoming an adept thief and burglar.[59]

Selina Kyle's anxious-resistant modality of attachment is evident in her relations with Batman, which are characterized by high emotional fluctuation. On the one hand, there is the obsessive desire of being close, powerful erotic tension and possessiveness, and on the other there is hostility, rapacity and betrayals. Selina yearns to be close with Batman, but at the same time she is afraid of being rejected and the relationship ending. One moment she attracts and seduces the Bat only to push him away and demonstrate enmity the next.

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[57] D.J. Wallin, *Przywiązanie w psychoterapii*, pp. 13–15.

[58] B. Tryjarska, *Style przywiązania partnerów a tworzenie bliskich związków w dorosłości*, in: B. Tryjarska (ed.), *Bliskość w rodzinie. Więzi w dzieciństwie a zaburzenia w dorosłości*, Warsaw 2010, pp. 186–188.

[59] D. Moench, J. Balent, *Cat Shadows*, „Catwoman" vol. 2, 0/1994.

Lacking a sense of safety, she is affected by strong anxiety and inability to control her emotions.

Tony Stark, or Iron Man, embodies the style known as avoidant. Tony's father was emotionally insensitive to the needs of his son, kept him at a distance and devoted virtually all of his time to work.[60] This resulted in a feeling of loneliness and being rejected by the father, with love and tenderness absent. As a result, the adult Tony Stark is ill-at-ease in a deeper relationship and afraid of intimacy. Although he becomes involved with many women, those are short-lived, insignificant affairs. His skills and wealth serve him to become thoroughly independent of others. Next to many practical functions that enable him to fight evil, the futuristic Iron Man suit plays yet another role, symbolically separating Stark from the external world and allowing him to keep everyone at a distance.

Superman, the best known and the most iconic superhero appeals to very many people. Superman is one of the most powerful individuals in the superhero world, a person gifted with a good heart and unshakeable belief in people. He is therefore associated with strength, overcoming obstacles or being victorious, but there is the aspect of selfless help and caring for others as well. Hence, Superman very often functions as a paragon in child and adult counselling, but he may also be a person who accompanies the client in their struggles and reinforces their sense of safety. Even his attributes can perform the latter role, such as the cape in the previously cited case history of Kenneth.

Despite all his virtues and strengths, Superman does have a weakness, being susceptible to kryptonite, a radioactive element from his home planet. Exposure to the element causes Superman to lose his powers and, if it is sustained long enough, kill him. The motif is greatly suited as a point of departure to talk about strength and weakness or the inability to cope with something. Many children find it difficult to accept failure and become discouraged after the first unsuccessful attempt. The example of Superman may enable them to realize that having a weakness is a natural element in life and that everyone has their weak spot – even Superman – which does not make him any less "super." Moreover, the awareness of one's shortcomings can be a vital resource in life which actually facilitates achieving success. Conscious of his vulnerability to kryptonite, Superman can prepare adequately, e.g. by putting on a suit protecting him from the harmful radiation before a confrontation with a villain. Similarly, a child who knows about their "kryptonite" (e.g. stress occasioned by speaking in front of the class) may minimize the unfavourable

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[60] *Iron Man 2*, dir. J. Favreau, USA 2010.

impact of that factor (e.g. develop a strategy for mitigating stress which arises in such circumstances).

Wonder Woman is a highly interesting character. She was created by psychologist William Moulton Marston as a personification of the feminine strength and value, which is why it may be employed in therapy and psychoeducation to build the sense of self-worth and subjectivity in women of various ages. It should be noted that Wonder Woman is not only equal to other (male) superheroes in terms of skill and strength, but pursues her crusade against evil in a completely different fashion. Marston conceived the Amazon as a "warrior of love," a superheroine whose greatest power is the power of her heart: compassion, empathy, and love for all beings, even her enemies. Having vanquished a foe, Wonder Woman often demonstrates concern for their fates, changing them into an ally as a result.[61] Not infrequently, her adventures provide examples of practical application of the so-called restorative justice, which consists in leading to an encounter of the perpetrator with the victim to talk about what has happened. The wrongdoer can thus grasp the consequences of their act, accept responsibility and improve his functioning in a community. In their turn, the victim is actively involved, which attenuates negative emotions and the sense of helplessness, while the local community is able to minimize the social costs of the crime and prevent the offence from repeating. Wonder Woman comic books feature plenty of examples showing the concept used in practice.[62] Consequently, they may serve to discuss such issues as justice, empathy, revenge or forgiveness during a counselling session.

Daredevil, on the other hand, is an example of a person with disability who in spite of his deficit (lack of vision) can function perfectly in his environment. The character may be referred to while working with a disabled person (especially one who has suddenly been affected by a handicap and suffers a breakdown). Daredevil is a proof that loss of full ability does not mean the loss of individual value and degradation to a lesser person. Through hard work, Daredevil managed to develop skills and faculties that not only make up for the deficits, but which in many respects outstrip the potential of a fully able person (such as the super-sensitive sense of smell or the ability to recognize that someone is lying based on the changes in heart rate). On the other hand Daredevil may be useful as a tool to educate and sensitize the non-disabled to the existence of persons with disabilities and the necessity of treating them as individuals whose worth is in no way diminished.

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[61] M. Siromski, *Wonder Woman: Wojowniczka Miłości*, „AKT" 15/2017, p. 11.

[62] I. Boucher, *Honing Our Senses: Remembering the Vibrancy of Super-Hero Justice*, in: I. Boucher (ed.), *Humans and Paragons: Essays on Super-Hero Justice*, Edwardsvillle 2017, pp. 219–222.

The character of Barbara Gordon, or Batgirl, may elicit similar notions. One of the most important allies of Batman in *The Killing Joke*[63] is brutally attacked at home by Joker. A shot to the stomach damages her spine and leaves her legs paralyzed. However, Barbara has to struggle both with the physical limitations caused by the injury and the psychological ramifications of losing health; extremely agile and active previously, the superheroine is now permanently confined to a wheelchair. And yet, she does not break down but, on the contrary, finds a way to continue as a superheroine though in a slightly different manner. Talented at technology and analyzing information she becomes Oracle, a one-person information centre for superheroes, remotely coordinating their actions, ensuring immediate communication and processing data necessary in their missions. This may be very helpful when working with those who have to redefine their life's goals due to an impairment of their erstwhile ability.

Spider-Man's character may prove useful in discussing the consequences of one's action and taking responsibility for them. When Peter Parker was bitten by a radioactive spider which gave him the spider-powers, his first thought was to use them for his own profit, which is why he decided to enter fights for money. After one of the bouts, he lets a criminal escape while on his way to the elevator, explaining to the security officer chasing him that it is not his business. Several days later, his beloved uncle Ben is killed by the same thug. The devastated Peter realizes that having superhuman powers entail a particular responsibility, and that his duty is to employed them for the good of others rather than for his own advantage.[64] At that point, he decided to become a superhero and henceforth always does the right thing, even though the price is very high.[65]

Other therapeutic applications of the character are associated with the fact that as a teenager, Parker is not greatly popular with his peers. He is ridiculed by his schoolmates as a boring nerd and bullied by the stronger boys; the girls at best ignore him. Such experiences are not alien to many teenagers, and the example of Spider-Man may help them understand that in such circumstances one can still be a superhero as much as their abilities allow.

Tony Stark, or Iron Man is another interesting figure. A genius of technology, visionary and inventor, he is owner of a major arms manufacturing concern built around his designs. Developing advanced weapons of the future, he not only makes a fortune but also becomes a symbol and champion of the American dream. The success (as well as the less than happy childhood) make

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[63] A. Moore, B. Bolland, *Batman: Zabójczy żart*, transl. T. Sidorkiewicz, Warsaw 2012.

[64] S. Lee, S. Ditko, *Spider-Man!*, "Amazing Fantasy" vol. 1, 15/1962.

[65] This is splendidly depicted in e.g. *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, dir. J. Watts, USA 2017.

him an conceited, insolent man who looks down on everyone, shows them little respect and ignores their opinions. He does not even respect the person closest to him, Pepper Potts, without whom he would not be able to function. In his interpersonal relations, he is arrogant, ironic and obnoxious. This easily leads to conflicts which is why he remains lonely for a long time, unable to find common ground with others and somewhat miserable.[66] What is more, the stress of the superhero crusade causes Stark to surrender to the pressure and begins to abuse alcohol (in the comic books[67]) or suffers from anxiety disorder (in the films[68]).

Thanks to the charisma, the brilliant, cynical sense of humour and spirited acting by Robert Downey Jr in Marvel's cinematic universe, Iron Man is among the best liked and recognizable superheroes. His adventures include many tropes that may work well in counselling or psychoeducation; he could be a model of the avoidant attachment mode (as noted previously), or offer a basis to discuss where striving to achieve a goal at any cost – disregarding the feelings and needs of others – may eventually lead. Finally, Stark's character illustrates anxiety disorder and addiction, showing that no one, even a superhero, is not immune to such issues.

The stories from Marvel's mutant world seems greatly suited for therapy as well. When in 1975 the British-born Chris Claremont became the writer of the *Uncanny X-Men*, the not very widely read mutant series transformed into a best-selling epic about the fear of strangeness and intolerance towards otherness, about stigmatization and discrimination. The mutants risk their lives to protect ordinary people who not only do not appreciate the fact but consider them repulsive oddities, dangerous beings whom one should eliminate from society. They often become the object of hateful media campaigns and collective aversion, as in the comic *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills*[69] or the motion picture *X-Men*.[70] No wonder then that many readers who feel discriminated because they are different identify with the comic and find solace in its message. One of the eloquent examples is the life story of Janina Scarlet from Ukraine who was exposed as a child to radiation following the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl. Some time later, already as a teenager living in the United States, the negative effects of radiation produced symptoms which led to per-

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[66] *Iron Man*, dir. J. Favreau, USA 2008.

[67] D. Michelinie, J. Romita Jr., C. Infantino, *Iron Man: Demon w butelce*, transl. T. Sidorkiewicz, Warsaw 2014.

[68] *Iron Man 3*, dir. S. Black, China – USA 2013.

[69] Ch. Claremont, B. Anderson, *X-Men: Bóg kocha, człowiek zabija*, transl. K. Stanisławski, Warsaw 2017.

[70] *X-Men*, dir. B. Singer, USA 2000.

secution and ostracism from her peers. She then discovered the film *X-Men*, in which she saw a reflection of her life situation at the time. That experience, as well as later work as a psychotherapist inspired her to develop and popularize superhero therapy, a current in counselling which will be discussed in greater detail further on.[71]

In a singular fashion, the fates of Marvel's mutants may be a metaphor of the struggles faced by persons whose gender or sexual orientation differs from those that tend to be recognized as standard in various societies. Hiding one's true nature, the experience of coming out, discrimination, rejection and violence from the "regular" people are common to the mutants and non-heteronormative persons. This correspondence is confirmed by numerous persons from the LGBTQ community. For instance, Ramzi Fawaz, a researcher investigating the queer aspect in superhero comic books, stated in an interview:

> I was thirteen I went through this incredibly difficult period of my own life, as someone who was coming out as gay, who was ostracized, made fun of, bullied, etc., and, during this period of difficulty, I discovered the X-Men. I began reading this comic book that was about mutant outcasts, that was racially diverse, and I felt this incredible kind of identification with these characters that I never found in any other form of popular culture.[72]

This is no accident that the X-Men universe includes the largest number of non-heteronormative characters, such as Northstar (the first superhero to come out on the pages of a comic book and celebrate a gay wedding there), Iceman or Mystique.[73]

Considering the above, the mutant characters may provide appreciable help in counselling, both with non-heteronormative persons[74] and with individuals who experience discrimination and violence for other reasons. On the other hand, they may also offer splendid educational material in raising awareness of otherness, especially with regard to different sexualities.

Numerous stories in the mutant world focus on young protagonists whose superhuman capabilities are manifested during their adolescence, frightening their friends, family and themselves. The young mutants are unable to control

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[71] J. Scarlet, *Superhero Therapy. A hero's journey through acceptance and commitment therapy*, London 2016, pp. 5–11.

[72] R. Fawaz, *The Difference A Mutant Makes*, avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2016/01/28/the-difference-a-mutant-makes, 2016 [28.07.2020].

[73] M. Siromski, *W tęczowej pelerynie. Tematyka homoseksualna w komiksie superbohaterskim*, „AKT" 18/2018, pp. 59–66.

[74] Cf. R. Kaufman, *Heroes Who Learn to Love Their Monsters: How Film Characters Can Inspire the Journey of Individuation for Gay and Lesbian Clients in Psychotherapy*, in: L.C. Rubin, *Using Superheroes…*, pp. 293–318.

the unusual abilities, do not know what to do about them and feel profoundly ashamed as a result. They live with a sense of being a misfit, freak, someone repulsive. The proposal to join Professor Xavier's school is usually received with a mixture of relief and anger, as they refuse to accept that they cannot be normal. When they arrive at the school, they have to go through a period of adaptation, find their place among other students, form friendships, and overcome the difficulties. Such stories can be readily employed in therapy with adolescent clients who begin to get to know the abilities and the limitations of their developing bodies and minds, at a time when they struggle with many potent emotions and difficult interactions with their peers. Again, this may be a convenient point of departure for a conversation about growing up, about the relationships with people of one's age, the importance of having a mentor, about strength, development and morality.

One of the characters in the superhero pantheon appears to be cut out for work involving children with diagnosed ADHD. Impulse, or Bart Allen, is a grandson of Barry Allen, the current Flash. Bart was born capable of superspeed and was brought up in virtual reality where he did not have the opportunity to find out that each action has its particular effects. Brought back into our world, he only has to learn that thought must precede action. At the same time, Bart lives a typical life of a child, doing household chores and attending boring classes at school. His hyperactive nature and inability to focus attention constantly lead to problems with his teachers and classmates. However, thanks to Flash, Impulse learns how to take decisions, learns to analyze potential solutions and their consequences. Clients with ADHD identify with the character to a substantial degree, which is why it may be a mainstay of acquiring similar skills, namely to plan in advance instead of plunging headlong into action.[75]

Further superhero figures whose example may be employed in psychotherapy and psychoeducation include: Aquaman (absence of parents, upbringing at the juncture of two cultures, loss of hand), Captain America (culture shock, difficulty adapting to modern realities, shield as a metaphor of physical or mental defence), Catwoman (inner conflict between good and evil), Professor X (figure of carer – mentor, disability), the Fantastic Four (traumatic accident, family conflicts, raising children), Hawkeye (transformation from a villain into a superhero, temporary loss of hearing), Green Lantern (ring of power as a metaphor of a "switch" which activates superpowers), Martian Manhunter (loss of family and home, adaptation in a strange environment, fear of fire, hiding true appearance), Magneto (surviving Nazi concentration

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[75] C.A. Nelson, *What Would Superman Do?...*, pp. 56–57.

camp, distrust of people), Namor (impulsiveness), Nightcrawler (persecution due to appearance, low self-esteem), Nightwing (striving for independence and coming out of the shadow of the mentor) or Wolverine (trauma, anger management issues).

Therapeutic methods employing superhero motifs

The inclusion of the motifs discussed above does not essentially require any new methods in counselling, as they can be successfully woven into the tried and tested techniques which have been in use for years.

Superheroes dovetail excellently with Play Therapy, which consists in the very basic eponymous activity of the child. The task of the therapist is to create a space for that play and attune themselves emotionally which – through play – allows the child to express themselves and the issues it may have but cannot convey verbally. A positive relationship emerging between the therapist and the child provides corrective emotional experience, stimulates cognitive development and offer insights into dysfunctional thought patterns of the child and its inner conflicts, showing the child how they can be resolved.[76]

Impersonating a superhero in the course of play, the child experiences the feeling of strength, control over the situation and self-confidence. They may also safely play out various scenarios and solve them as their favourite superhero would.[77] The experience can subsequently be internalized and applied in various situations in life.

In fact, superheroes can be employed as part of all basic modalities of play therapy, such as:

– Sandtray/Sandplay Therapy. This form of therapy originated with the Swiss psychoanalyst Dora Kalff. It relies on unconstrained quasi-play of the child in a wooden tray filled with sand. Using various props (water, sand, figures) the child creates a miniature world which reflects their inner processes: emotions, needs or memories. The sandplay method may have numerous benefits, since it does not require verbal skill on the part of the child, encourages creativity and expression of emotions, does not trigger defensive mechanisms and makes it possible for the child to overcome the role of avictim and become the creator. Superhero figures can be successfully used in this method

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[76] A.A. Drewes, Ch.E. Schaefer, *The Therapeutic Powers of Play*, in: K.J. O'Connor, Ch.E. Schaefer, L.D. Braverman, *Handbook of Play Therapy*, New Jersey 2016, pp. 35–60.

[77] R.J. Porter, *Superheroes in Therapy: Uncovering Children's Secret Identities*, in: L.C. Rubin, *Using Superheroes…*, p. 24.

for therapeutic purposes, also in the case of adults, as demonstrated by William McNulty[78];

– storytelling and use of metaphor. In this technique, the therapist creates a story which reflects the problem of the client and encourages their identification with the characters of events in the narrative. The next step is interpretation; the client gains knowledge they may later use in life.[79] Again, the technique can successfully rely on superhero stories;

– artistic expression. Using drawing, music, dance, theatre or poetry in therapy permits emotions to be expressed and facilitates metaphorical comprehension of the client's inner processes by the therapist and the client themselves.[80] Superhero motifs can also be used here; for instance, Robert J. Porter suggests a way of employing Donald Winnicott's Squiggle Game,[81] in which the child, assisted by the therapist, draws random squiggles on a piece of paper and then transforms them into meaningful drawing. Other tools include The Story Maker (a program in which one can create an interactive comic with a large range of background elements, objects, characters, animation and sounds)[82] and The HeroMachine (serving to create one's own unique superhero of any gender, body shape, or height, wearing any costume and even having an animal sidekick).[83] Porter also present case studies showing how those methods function in practice[84];

– elements of acting and role-playing. Playing roles is one of the typical ways for children to play. Used therapeutically, it can enhance the child's interpersonal and communicative competence, allowing them to understand others better. It may also reflect the nature of relationships which are important for the child, their traumatic experiences, family situation or the path of their social and emotional development.[85] Steve Harvey provides several role-playing scenarios, including one entitled "Superheroes," in which the therapist asks the participants to draw a character that represents the powers which are necessary in a given context. Then the participants are requested to prepare

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[78] W. McNulty, *Superheroes and Sandplay: Using the Archetype Through the Healing Journey*, in: L.C. Rubin, *Using Superheroes...*, pp. 69–87.

[79] P. Pernicano, *Metaphors and Stories in Play Therapy*, in: K.J. O'Connor, Ch.E. Schaefer, L.D. Braverman, *Handbook...*, pp. 263–264.

[80] J.G. Byers, *Expressive Arts in Play Therapy*, in: K.J. O'Connor, Ch.E. Schaefer, L.D. Braverman, *Handbook...*, p. 277.

[81] R.J. Porter, *Superheroes in Therapy...*, p. 26.

[82] Ibidem, p. 27.

[83] Ibidem, pp. 27–28.

[84] Ibidem, pp. 28–44.

[85] S. Harvey, *Using Drama in Play Therapy*, in: K.J. O'Connor, Ch.E. Schaefer, L.D. Braverman, *Handbook...*, p. 289.

the costumes and masks as well as play the character. At any moment, the therapist may introduce another superhero to influence the plot. According to Harvey, the scenario may be used to discuss facing up to extreme threat.[86] Also, George Enfield provides examples of practical use of superhero motifs in role-playing, along with a specific case study[87];

– use of board and card games. The technique may encompass both widely available, popular games, as well as those specially designed for therapeutic purposes. Just as with other forms of play-based therapy, the client may enact various behaviours, confront difficult situation or reveal hidden emotions; at the same time, the game may lead to actions which are more goal-oriented and encourage the client to practice a serious approach. This may result in greater involvement, offering the therapist a greater amount of diagnostic information (relating e.g. to the manner of engaging in interpersonal interaction, the skill of collaboration and emulation, tolerance to frustration, ability of strategic thinking, intelligence, or the ability of adapting to norms).[88] George Enfield notes that superhero-themed war board games can be profitably used in that fashion, for example Truth and Justice or HeroClix – also popular in Poland – which features figures of popular superheroes (e.g. Marvel HeroClix, DC HeroClix).[89]

At this point, it may be underlined after Heidi Gerard Kaduson that while play therapy is chiefly employed with children, it can also be useful to support clients of other ages, even with elderly persons.[90]

Superhero motifs can be utilized as well in the narrative therapy, which rests on the premise that everyone has a need to see the point in what happens to them. Life tends to be perceived as a story (narrative) which lends specific meaning to one's personal experience.

> The autobiographical narrative integrates life's experience and internalizes one's own tale, which contains individual goals and the meaning of life.[91]

However, certain events may remain incomprehensible and difficult to be reconciled with, or they are interpreted according to a pattern which is harmful to oneself. Narrative therapy aims to discern the stories in the events one

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[86] Ibidem, p. 299.

[87] G. Enfield, *Becoming the Hero: The Use of Role-Playing Games in Psychotherapy*, in: L.C. Rubin, *Using Superheroes…*, pp. 227–241.

[88] J. Stone, *Board Games in Play Therapy*, in: K.J. O'Connor, Ch.E. Schaefer, L.D. Braverman, *Handbook…*, p. 313.

[89] G. Enfield, *Becoming the Hero…*, p. 228.

[90] H.G. Kaduson, *Play Therapy Across the Life Span: Infants, Children, Adolescents, and Adults*, in: K.J. O'Connor, Ch.E. Schaefer, L.D. Braverman, *Handbook…*, p. 339.

[91] M. Molicka, *Życie opowiedziane na nowo*, "Charaktery Extra" 3/2019, p. 17.

has experienced so as to see the previously elusive meaning. Another aim may be to change the narrative so far, in order to reinterpret one's experience and approach oneself and the relationships with others from a new perspective. Studies demonstrate that such a "beneficial" narrative significantly improves the functioning of an individual, and does so in many ways: from a sense of greater control over events, stronger will power and more frequent experience of positive emotions to reduced number of visits at a doctor's, better grades at school or finding new employment faster after losing a job.[92]

The so-called origin story is good example of a superhero motif suited for narrative therapy. Each superhero has their origin story, an account of how they acquired their powers, why they became a superhero and what events moulded them. Similarly, a client attending a therapy has their origin story as well: events which proved formative and influenced the course of their life. A serious accident, trauma, experience of violence or loss of a loved one; if a client is encouraged to look at their life story as a narrative telling a certain origin story, then the same events may turn out to be those which shape the personality of the superhero. The client can apprehend and accept the significance of the painful events, regain control over how they will affect their life, and even see a chance to forge their superpowers, just as superheroes do.

Superhero motifs are also easily adapted into art therapy.. After Marian Kulczycki, Wita Szulc defines art therapy as a

> […] paradigm of views and actions oriented towards sustaining and/or improving the quality of human life thanks to broadly understood works of art and practicing art. The principal task of art therapy is […] optimization of life, which means that art therapy is associated with preventing life difficulties, and when they occur, with reducing their burden and overcoming obstacles in the immediate, situational, and general – i.e. looking forward – dimensions of life.[93]

One of the varieties of art therapy is bibliotherapy, or a "process of dynamic interaction between the personality of the reader and literature, conducted under supervision of the person who provides help."[94]

Literature (including comic books) "has an effect on experiencing emotions, familiarizes one with various situations and makes it possible to approach them from different standpoints. Also, or perhaps above all, it enables one to become aware and understand the emotions of others."[95] Books in

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[92] M. Straś-Romanowska, B. Bartosz, M. Żurko (eds.), *Badania narracyjne w psychologii*, Warsaw 2010. pp. 18–19.

[93] W. Szulc, *Arteterapia. Narodziny idei, ewolucja teorii, rozwój praktyki*, Warsaw 2011, p. 57.

[94] Ibidem, p. 130.

[95] M. Molicka, *Życie opowiedziane…*, p. 15.

general, and superhero comic books in particular, activate imagination and dreams. They are a way to envision oneself in different roles, which in itself contributes to self-knowledge, satisfies various psychological needs, as well as shapes one's identity.

The standard bibliotherapeutic approach involves determination of the problem affecting the patient, independent perusal of the book suggested by the therapist, identification of the client with the situation or protagonist in the story, a cathartic experience which changes the client's perception of the problem to understand its essence, and discussing the text with the client. Superhero comic books offer suitable material in this case, as their substance – as demonstrated previously – can be aligned with the issues experienced by the client.

Carmela Wenger describes effective use of superheroes in counselling children with attachment disorders.[96] The children are often affected by a sense of threat and fear of being hurt. Quite often, the fear is concealed behind a facade of a fantasy of invincibility and omnipotence. Superheroes resonate powerfully with such fantasies, since they embody superhuman strength, concern for others, competence and composure.

Children who have suffered a trauma or experienced dysfunctional relationships with their parents may develop an "external self" which differs from the inner one. That twofold self corresponds very well with the double identity of superheroes which, being readily relatable, enables that duality to be understood. Many superheroes are outsiders who function beyond the social system, manifesting for instance in the absence of family life. However, this is a conscious choice of such a lifestyle; a child separated (for whatever reasons) from their biological family and placed in foster care does not have such a choice. Playing a superhero, the child may recover the sense of subjectivity: they may defensively exclude their latent need of attachment and become a hero instead of a rejected scapegoat. Just as a hero with a double identity, the child may detach the needs associated with pain (the "inner self") from the sense of control and strength (the "external self").

Another important therapeutic aspect of superheroes is their capacity for transformation. Frightened victims at first, Batman or Spider-Man transform into heroes because they work hard and hone their skills. Hawkeye or Black Widow change from villains into superheroes thanks to their decisions and actions. Numerous children with attachment disorders cause what is seen as problems, which is why their environment labels them as "bad children," "ill-mannered," or "black sheep." The myth of superhero awakens their hopes of

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[96] C. Wenger, *Superheroes in Play Therapy…*, pp. 193–211.

personal redemption, showing that a transformation from a villain into a hero admired by everyone is possible.

Yet another vital aspect derives from the notion of the superhero as a guardian – defender. Harmed by adults, children yearn for genuine care and competent caretakers. Wenger observes as follows:

> Unlike the incompetent and unavailable adults in their lives, superheroes arrive when they are needed and know exactly what to do. Unlike their battered mother, a female superhero is invincible. Unlike their drug-addicted caretaker or parent, the superhero is always alert and responsive. The child can experience the safety of being in the hands of an all-powerful, responsive adult who is always good.[97]

The therapy of a child with an attachment disorder consists in building a therapeutic rapport based on trust. As trust increases, the problems of the child are revealed, while their play changes to reflect those problems. Engaging superheroes in the play enables dysfunctional patterns of emotion, thought and behaviour to be replaced with new, more adaptive coping strategies. At that juncture, the child takes greater risks, lowers their defences and becomes more open to exploratory play. The scope of the affect expands, exposing the previously rejected elements of the "self," such as susceptibility to harm or dependency.[98] Wenger also cites a case study to illustrate that therapeutic approach.[99]

For his part, Cory A. Nelson developed a special counselling technique intended for "difficult" children, which he called *What Would Superman Do*. Relying on Alfred Adler's theory of therapy, the technique is composed of four stages: (a) establishing a therapeutic relationship with the child, (b) assessment of the child's lifestyle in the context of goals and expectations, (c) use of a superhero character which is significant for the child, so that they may gain insights into their lifestyle; subsequently, the child is introduced to alternatives to maladaptive thoughts and behaviours (along the lines of "What would Superman do?"), (d) reorientation of the child so that they can apply the skill they have learned in interactions with parents or peers. The technique enables children to identify superhero traits in themselves and use them in real life.[100]

Patty Scanlon provides an example of drawing on a superhero in the therapy of a child with autism who, playing the favourite hero (Superman) during

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[97] Ibidem, p. 197.
[98] Ibidem, p. 198.
[99] Ibidem, pp. 199–211.
[100] C.A. Nelson, *What Would Superman Do?...*, pp. 52–54.

a session, was able to internalize their character features and, as a result, improve the child's functioning within the family and at school.[101]

Jan M. Burte argues that superhero characters can even be in hypnosis, as representations of certain metaphors associated with the convictions of the client, their emotions or state of mind.

> Hypnotic intervention enables patients to experience the qualities of superheroes in overcoming a multitude of emotional and physical limitations. By becoming that character while in trance and maintaining the ability to call on that character via posthypnotic suggestion, the person can, at will, transform into the character regardless of the place in time. Character traits can be 'locked in' and become viable parts of their selves.[102]

This type of posthypnotic suggestion can be applied for instance to minimize physical pain, treat trauma, mitigate anxiety, teach new behaviours and skills, enhance the ego and raise self-esteem, as well as to boost healing processes during an illness.[103] According to Burte, Superman, Supergirl, Wonder Woman, Human Torch, Silver Surfer and Hulk are particularly suited for such purposes.

With respect to therapy, superhero motifs are probably brought to bear to the fullest in the method known as superhero therapy, developed by clinical psychologist Janina Scarlet on the basis of the acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). The current essentially aims to increase clients readiness for attentive experience of their thoughts and emotions, so that they may live in accordance with the values they hold. Consequently, Scarlet draws during therapy on the stories, emotions, and difficulties experienced by the client's favourite heroes, including superheroes in the main.[104] As an example, the therapist cites the case of her client, a sailor who had lost the use of his legs due to war wounds, and suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder:

> He believed that he is no hero anymore because of the disability. He lost his sense of identity. We looked at the *Batgirl* series, whose heroine also lost the use of her legs, struggled with PTSD and was also trying to establish her identity. The sailor understood that Batgirl remained a superheroine using other skills. She inspired him to take advantage of his other talents and pursued the valued he found important. And thus, he regained his identity of a superhero.[105]

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[101] P. Scanlon, *Superheroes Are Super Friends…*, pp. 183–188.

[102] J.M. Burte, *Hypnosis and Superheroes*, in: L.C. Rubin, *Using Superheroes…*, p. 276.

[103] Ibidem, pp. 275–285.

[104] M. Chudoliński, *(Super)bohater własnego życia*, "Charaktery Extra" 3/2019, p. 48.

[105] Ibidem, p. 48.

It may be noted that the recent decade saw the emergence of highly useful online tools which facilitate therapeutic and educational use of superheroes. For example, Patrick O'Connor, psychologist from The Chicago School of Professional Psychology created the website Comicspedia.net, with a database of catalogued superhero comics whose themes could be employed during counselling sessions. The database enables one to browse and search comic books according to names of characters, subject (e.g. violence, loss of a loved one, struggling with fear), and even demographic data of the hero (e.g. age, ethnicity, gender).[106]

Clinical psychologist Andrea Letamendi runs *Under the Mask*,[107] a blog in which she analyzes superhero characters and villains from a psychological perspective. The core section of the blog is a series of podcasts entitled *The Arkham Sessions*, during which the author discusses the episodes of *Batman: The Animated Series* in terms of the issues they show and the difficult experiences of the protagonists, such as loneliness, depression, or trauma.

Another noteworthy blog is the aforementioned Janina Scarlet's *Superhero Therapy*,[108] where one finds psychological overviews of superhero characters, films in the Marvel and DC universes, as well as other popular motion pictures (e.g. *Star Wars*), television shows (e.g. *Westworld*) or book series (e.g. *Harry Potter*).

Instead of conclusions:
the case of the Onarga Academy

In the text entitled *A Super Milieu: Using Superheroes in the Residential Treatment of Adolescents With Sexual Behavior Problems*,[109] a group of therapists presents their authorial methodology of working with adolescents aged 12–16, who displayed sexual behaviour problems and, often enough, other complex issues (e.g. oppositional defiant disorder, behavioural disorders, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, bipolar disorders, adaptation disorders, depressive disorders, PTSD, cognitive, emotional or social deficits). The therapeutic program at the residential facility of the Onarga Academy largely employs the elements of the superhero metaphor to teach clients new cognitive schemata

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[106] www.comicspedia.net/database.html.
[107] webdev7.801ed.com.
[108] www.superhero-therapy.com.
[109] K. Robertie, R. Weidenbenner, L. Barrett, R. Poole, *A Super Milieu: Using Superheroes in the Residential Treatment of Adolescents With Sexual Behavior Problems*, in: L.C. Rubin, *Using Superheroes...*, pp. 143–168.

and behaviour patterns. The program is based on the premises of the cognitive-behavioural therapy and comprises the following elements:

– presentation of the "nexus cornerstones," or four values which are the mainstay for a healthy change in the clients. Each is represented by a specific superhero: Spider-Man stands for responsibility, Daredevil for courage, Superman epitomizes care and concern, while Batman represent honesty;

– role-playing game, in which the therapist selects a small group of clients and assigns them individually suited personalities of superheroes whose powers represent a given client in one way or another. The clients themselves prepare the likenesses of their characters, using a preferred technique. Also, each client-player receives a specific number of karma points, which grows or diminishes depending on their actions during the game (e.g. supporting others makes karma grown, selfish actions reduce it). In the course of the game, the group is tasked with solving a problem which reflects actual issues; for instance, clients who find it difficult to communicate with one another have to collaborate in order to defeat a supervillain;

– use of films, televisions series, games, comic books and songs with superhero themes as a basis for discussing the issues that the clients have;

– the Superhero Month, during which each client designs their own hero, including the appearance, powers, and the origin story. The task enables clients to identify with the character and see the story of one's struggles in their vicissitudes;

– introduction of the notion of "everyday superheroes," which aims to make clients aware that superheroism is defined by one's decisions and actions, but has little to do with wearing a costume. Subsequently, clients find out about a number of actual heroes who realize the superhero values;

– "What If?" stories, in which Marvel's "What If…." format (designed to present alternative versions of the fates of protagonists) as a creative exercise. The clients are expected to create an alternative story of a well-known superhero, e.g. what would happen if Spider-Man decided to use his powers for evil purposes. As a result, the clients (who often happen to take wrong decisions in life and fail to draw conclusions from their mistakes) learn that the development of distinctiveness and building one's identity consist in an endless sequence of choices and reaching conclusions on the basis of their consequences;

– sandplay therapy using superhero figures;

– drawing comic strips. The clients are given a blank comic strip and asked to illustrate their traumatic experiences, important events in their own life or the life of their families, dreams, hopes, and daily challenges. The exercise enables a deeper insight into their experience and lend them meaning.

The description of the outcomes of the above actions may offer a fitting conclusion of this text:

> Initially a client's understanding of superheroes may be fairly superficial. The biographies of the superheroes will begin to personally resonate with clients as their self-understanding grows. The early life experiences of the hero may act as a mirror for clients to view their own unpleasant life events. The hero's journey, transformation, and ultimate victory offer clients hope. Often clients question their ability to succeed in treatment. They are wondering if they can make the personal changes necessary to live a healthy life. They are unsure if they can bear the pain of facing the issues that led to treatment. The super-hero's story gives them a road map and a picture of the destination to which they are striving. The superhero's story helps them believe that the very obstacles of their past can become their greatest assets and strengths. They find their own story in the histories and biographies of the superheroes they love to read about. Through the superhero's struggle and ultimate success, our clients find their own strength and ability to persevere. Superheroes allow our clients to distance themselves from their own pain while acknowledging and experiencing it in a fuller, more meaningful way. When clients can simultaneously distance from and experience their issues, they have the opportunity to sort through their thoughts, questions, and reactions. Clients can begin truly to resolve their issues in a safe yet genuine way.[110]

Summary

The text is the first Polish analysis of the therapeutic and psychoeducational potential of superhero stories. The author presents sources of this potential (the great popularity of superheroes, the ease of activating imagination, characteristic elements of a super-hero myth, that resonate with the experiences of the audience).Then the text discusses the theoretical basis of the use of superheroes in therapy, based on theories about play therapy and the concept of mentalization.The main part of the text is an overview of themes and characters with therapeutic potential. The author discusses the motives of trauma, loss of parents, anger, superteam, fight against evil, among others. He also describes over a dozen superhero characters such as Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, Hulk, Spider-Man, Iron Man or Marvel mutants.In the last part therapeutic methods were presented for the use of superhero themes, mainly in the field of play therapy, narrative therapy and art therapy.

Keywords: superheroes, psychotherapy, play theory, Batman, attachment theory

Słowa kluczowe: superbohaterowie, psychoterapia, terapia zabawą, Batman, teoria przywiązania

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[110] Ibidem, p. 165.