5-8-2020

The Aluminum Age: Postmodern Themes in American Comics Circa 2001-2018

Amy Collerton
Georgia State University

THE ALUMINUM AGE: POSTMODERN THEMES IN AMERICAN COMICS CIRCA 1985-2018

by

AMY COLLERTON

Under the Direction of John McMillian, PhD

ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to update the fan-made system of organization for comic book history. Because academia ignored comics for much of their history, fans of the medium were forced to design their own system of historical organization. Over time, this system of ages was adopted not only by the larger industry, but also by scholars. However, the system has not been modified to make room for comics published in the 21st century. Through the analysis of a selection modern comics, including Marvel's *Civil War* and DC Comics' *Infinite Crisis*, this thesis suggests a continuation of the age system, the Aluminum Age (2001-the present). Comics published during the Aluminum Age incorporate Postmodern themes and are unique to the historical context in which they were published. By analyzing the content of comics and the historical context in which they were published, this thesis proves the necessity of a new age.

INDEX WORDS: Comic books, American culture, American history, Popular culture, Cultural studies, Material culture

THE ALUMINUM AGE: POSTMODERN THEMES IN AMERICAN COMICS CIRCA 1985-2018

by

AMY COLLERTON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2020

THE ALUMINUM AGE: POSTMODERN THEMES IN AMERICAN COMICS CIRCA 1985-2018

by

AMY COLLERTON

Committee Chair: John McMillian

Committee: David Sehat

Electronic Version Approved: April 20, 2020

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2020

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Susan and Patrick Collerton for their unwavering faith and support throughout the writing process and to my sister, Ellie Collerton, for never giving me up or letting me down.

This thesis is also dedicated to my grandparents who were not able to see me complete it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to acknowledge the aid of Dr. John McMillian and Dr. David Sehat for serving as readers and supporting the writing process of this thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CCA – Comics Code Authority
CoIE – *Crisis on Infinite Earths*
TDKR – *The Dark Knight Returns*
v. – Volume

1 INTRODUCTION

Widely regarded as one of the fathers of comic book fandom, Richard Allen (Dick) Lupoff, visited Pittsburgh's World Science Fiction Convention in 1960, where he and his wife, Pat, distributed the first issue of a fan publication called *Xero*. Wanting to fill the pages of *Xero* with original material, Dick wrote an eleven-page article about his favorite comic book superhero from the 1940s, Fawcett Comics' Captain Marvel. Later at the convention, Dick and Pat appeared in a costume contest dressed as Captain Marvel and Mary Marvel. "[They] were extremely popular costumes," Lupoff recalled.[1] The popularity of the couple's costumes, and the article on Captain Marvel, suggested there was still a robust audience for comics. At the time, however, comic book fans had limited resources. True, some fan publications dedicated to science fiction often included comic book pieces and news, but it was not until the spring of 1961 that fans began making a concentrated effort was made to carve out a space exclusively for themselves.

That was when Dick and Pat Lupoff published one of the first fan publications dedicated entirely to comic books, *Comic Art*. In the first issue, Dick wrote a column called "Rebirth" which included this crucial sentence: "[Comic books] came in the thirties, their golden age was in the forties [sic.]."[2] Unknowingly, with that sentence, Dick Lupoff gave birth to the system that would one day be used to organize the history of comic books in the late twentieth century. The most important word's in Dick's column were "golden age." Over the second half of the twentieth century, the 1940s would become known among comic fans as the Golden Age of comics. Once that naming convention caught on, other ages appeared. In a letter published in 1966's *Justice League of America* v.1 #42, a comic book fan named Scott Taylor wrote: "If you

[1] Dick Lupoff, "Rebirth," *Comic Art* #1, 1961, 3.
[2] Lupoff, "Rebirth," 5.

guys keep bringing back the heroes from the Golden Age, people 20 years from now will be calling this decade the Silver Sixties!"[3] Sure enough, in the modern age system, the 1960s are part of what is known as a the Silver Age.

Historically, academics have not devoted great attention to studying the comics, so fans of the medium have been given more or less free rein to organize and write that history themselves. These fans developed a system of ages that organized comics in a way that they could understand, and this system became somewhat standardized. The age system allows researchers to identify transformational points in the history of the medium. Since successful comic books normally spawned numerous imitators, those key moments generally gave rise, over a period of time, to a shift in the overall content of comic books. In some cases that shift was immediately apparent, while in others, the shift was gradual, and took a number of years to make itself known.

It was only when comics began to become more mature and serious in order to appeal to a now older fan base in the late 1970s and early 1980s that a few academics began to examine them in the same way that fans had since the 1960s. Even today, scholars are more often interested in how comics relate to another more "important" form of media, such as television and film, than how comics stand on their own. Scholars outside the realm of Film and Media Studies link comics with other academic fields, giving rise to books on "philosophy in comics" or "comics as history." Studying comics themselves without linking them to another academic field or form of media allows researchers to look at comics as complex texts and pieces of culture that inform and are informed by the world around them.[4] At their height, comics were

[3] Gardner Fox (w), Mike Sekowsky (p), Bernard Sachs (i), "Metamorpho Says—No!" Justice League of America v.1 #42 (February, 1966), National Periodical Publications Inc. [DC Comics].
[4] Greg M. Smith, "It Ain't Easy Studying Comics," *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 110-111.

the most popular form of media in the United States. They were read by nearly every child and a quarter of U.S. troops in World War II. That popularity has waned significantly in the twenty-first century, but images from comics are deeply embedded in western culture.[5] By ignoring comics, scholars have cast aside a massive amount of cultural material from the late twentieth century.

Whether they have scholarly credentials or not, most comic book scholarship continues to be done by fans of the genre. The contributions of those scholars who examined comics when others in academia refused—and who created an age system that enabled them to more easily discuss their passions—should not be ignored by modern historians. As the age system was originally created and defined by fans for the sake of being better able to discuss comics with other fans, any continuation of the age system must be made with the needs of fans in mind. It is in this area that additions to the age system suggested by scholars fail.[6] Defining an age by the dominant academic trends into which the books fall and attempting to attach significance to the names of the ages contributes nothing to comic book culture, provides little structure for fans when discussing comics as a whole, and actively misinterprets the reason for the existence of the age system.[7]

Keeping with the established trends in naming comic book ages, the new age of comic books should be given a metallic name that says something superficial about the books it encompasses. Regardless of the scholarly merit of the age system, it has become the dominant

---

[5] Greg M. Smith, Thomas Andrae, Scott Bukatman, and Thomas LaMarre, "Surveying the World of Contemporary Comics Scholarship: A Conversation, " *Cinema Journal* 50, no.3 (Spring, 2011): 146.

[6] One could argue that the new age should be named the "Postmodern Age" or the "Metamodern Age," but Postmodernism has a notoriously nebulous definition, and average comic book fans are rarely well versed in academic theories.

[7] The metallic naming conventions of the ages were never designed to inform anyone about the narrative and artistic trends in comics that fell into those ages. Indeed, if the specific names of the ages have come to signify anything, then they are representations of the modern cost of comics from that era, with Golden Age comics being more expensive than Silver Age and Platinum Age comics being even more expensive still.

mode of organization for the history of the comic medium. Even major comic book companies have begun to use the Age terminology to describe their publications.[8] The age system provides the beginnings of a framing device through which works of comic scholarship—both amateur and professional—can be displayed. Such a framework will never be able to encompass current comics as hindsight is needed to identify the shifting trends in comics, but it can function as a useful tool in examining how comics have changed broadly over the past century.

One of the age system's most important failings, however, is the fact that it has not been updated since 1985, and so a lot of modern comics have therefore been lazily placed in an age within which they do not seem to belong. Now it is time – it is *past* time – to finally remedy this situation. The purpose of this thesis is to establish a beginning to a new age of comic books called the Aluminum Age. It began after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and is characterized by a reduction in the levels of violence displayed, greater attention given to current events, greater levels of diversity, and increased numbers of comic book adaptations. Many of the people currently writing and drawing comic books were comic fans while growing up. These creators took inspiration from the comics they loved to read when they were younger and in doing so, reused themes and plotlines found in previously published comics.[9] One might say, in fact, that these plots have been recycled for a new audience. This recycling is, more than anything else, the facet of the new age that gave it its name.

---

[8] DC Comics in particular has used the terms "Golden Age" and "Silver Age" to describe books published at a certain time, even going as far as to publish omnibus collections of comics with titles like *Batman: The Golden Age Omnibus Volume 1* and *The Golden Age Green Lantern Archives Volume 1*. IDW Publishing has published a number of collections of syndicated comic strips with titles paying homage to the age system.

[9] Liz Ohanesian, "DC Comics Writer and Chief Creative Officer Geoff Johns Explains the Comic Books That Inspired Him." *L.A. Weekly*, last modified, 24 May 2016, www.laweekly.com/arts/dc-comics-writer-and-chief-creative-officer-geoff-johns-explains-the-comic-books-that-inspired-him-4184145.

The age system details the evolution of the comic book from an unrecognized form of publishing in the early 1930s, to a massive, award-winning publishing industry in the 1980s and 1990s. These changes came about in incremental ways. As will be demonstrated, The September 11th Attacks were particularly important in signifying the end of the Dark Age. Changes to the types of stories told in comics came about in 2001 that represented a shift away from the ever-escalating levels of violence that dominated comics from the previous age. New modes of storytelling became the dominant trend in comics during the Aluminum Age as violence was abandoned and the literary merit of the Dark Age was restructured to fit the new needs of the industry. An increasingly diverse cast of characters accompanied the changes to the narrative traditions of late twentieth century comic books. More mainstream attention to the industry brought several of its flaws to full view in the 1990s, and the Aluminum Age attempted to address some of those shortcomings by both altering its narrative and artistic conventions and adding more diversity to its casts. The Aluminum Age reframes comic book history in such a way that the social commentary found in comics published since 2001 is separated from that found in comic books published in the Dark Age. Such a distinction will also differentiate the narrative and artistic advancements in comics since 2001 from those of the Dark Age.

It was also in the Aluminum Age that comics began to be better utilized as transmedial objects. The ways in which comic books have adapted to fit other forms of media (films, television shows, books, etc.) is a unique aspect of the medium. The ease with which comic books are adapted makes them less "books" in the traditional sense and more transmedial—able to be represented across many modes of media—cultural forms. Thus, while few people actually read comics, the characters and storylines are almost ubiquitous in popular culture.[10] It is this

[10] Shawna Kidman, *Comic Books Incorporated: How the Business of Comics Became the Business of Hollywood* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019), 2-3.

paradox that the Aluminum Age exploited in the sudden boom of the comic book film into a multi-billion-dollar industry. Comics have long crossed media boundaries, but it was not until the early twenty-first century that the business of the comic book film became a multi-billion-dollar industry. The sudden popularity of the comic book film altered the stories being produced by the comic book industry. Enough changes were made to the comic book industry in 2001 to merit the existence of an addition to the age system beginning in that year. In the first chapter of this thesis, I will describe the earlier ages of comic books. Chapter two describes and analyzes the Dark Age. The most important analytical work in this thesis, however, occurs in chapter 3. That is where I propose the creation of a new age—the Aluminum Age— to reflect the changes in writing, representation, and adaptations from 2001 to 2018.

2 "THEY CAME IN THE THIRTIES, THEIR GOLDEN AGE WAS IN THE FORTIES.": THE EARLIEST AGES OF CCOMICS

When Dick Lupoff wrote the "Rebirth" column for inclusion in *Comic Art* #1 and included the above quote, there was no way for him to know that he was playing a role in the creation of the system by which fans and the larger comic book industry would organize the history of comic books. Of course, he was not the only person to play a role in the difficult evolution of comics and their study. Though the most important elements in that evolution often knew each other, the growth of the comic book was not an organized undertaking by any stretch of the imagination. The history of the comic book has not necessarily been a story of artistic innovations and narrative breakthroughs, but instead a story of the fight for respect. In their earliest days, comic books were routinely given away for free as part of an advertising promotion. Indeed, the publication that comic studies scholars widely recognized as the first modern comic book was given away for free as part of a series of promotions undertaken by a

number of clients of the Eastern Color Printing Company. Over the course of the twentieth century, comic books evolved from cheap publications given away for free to a vital tool of the World War II propaganda machine, to the villain behind juvenile delinquency and, finally, to both a multimillion-dollar transmedial industry and the underground domain of a nihilistic counterculture.

None of this evolution would have taken place without fans of the medium. Comic book fans acting as amateur historians, sociologists, and literary critics have participated in the narrative of comic book history in ways that are unheard of in other forms of media. These "outsiders" have been allowed to shape the narrative and organization to suit their needs rather than to conform to any academic standards. This system, naturally, has its downsides. For instance, there is an inordinate amount of attention paid to the superhero genre, often to the determent of both the age system itself and the work put into other genres of comics. This obsession with the superhero genre has also led amateur scholars to ignore the roots that the modern comic book industry has in the comic strips and political cartoons of the late nineteenth century. Some comic and art history scholars have even taken the history of comic books back to the sixteenth century and the narrative broadsheets that served as one of the main sources of news for the general public.[11] These earliest ages were not only inserted in the system long after the creation and acceptance of the more modern ages, but are also poorly defined and not widely accepted by fans of the medium. The history of the modern comic book began in 1883, and it is here that the age system begins in earnest with the Platinum Age.

[11] *The Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*, one of the longest standing fan publications concerning the history and value of comic books, includes two ages preceding the Platinum Age: The Pioneer Age (1500s-1828), and the Victorian Age (1828-1883). Though both of these ages are important to understanding the roots of the comic book as a literary form, the earliest days of the comic's evolution have little baring on the argument of this thesis.

2.1 The Birth of a Medium: The Platinum Age (1883-1938)

The world has a relatively unknown company called Eastern Color Printing Company to thank for the creation of the modern comic book. In 1929, Dell Publishing Company printed their first publication, *The Funnies*, through Eastern Color Printing. *The Funnies* was a collection of previously published comic strips that sold for 10 cents. Though not yet a modern comic book as fans would recognize today, *The Funnies* was nonetheless significant in the formation of the comic book industry, since its success "gave a couple of Eastern Color employees ideas."[12] Harry I. Wildenberg and Maxwell Charles Gaines (hereafter called M.C. Gaines), both under the employ of the Eastern Color Printing Company, imitated the style and format of *The Funnies* in 1933 to create a promotional comic for the Gulf Oil Company. *Gulf Comic Weekly* was tabloid sized, like *The Funnies*, and was given away for free at gas stations with a fill up.

Likewise, *Famous Funnies* was a promotional collection of comic strip reprints given out by a number of Eastern Color's clients and, according to legend, M.C. Gaines stuck a 10 cent price tag on a handful of them before giving them to newsstands in order to gauge whether or not the public was interested in paying for the comic by itself rather than receiving it as a promotion with another product. M.C. Gaines's experiment proved successful, with newsstands selling out over one weekend and vendors asking for more copies. One year later, in 1934, Eastern Color Printing moved beyond simply printing and packaging comics and became the first major comic book publisher. Though reprints of newspaper comic strips made up the majority of the books, original strips and material appeared after the first few issues proved that the book could be profitable. Having shown that people would be willing to pay for comic books that featured a mixture of original and reprinted material, M.C. Gaines and Eastern Color Printing laid the

[12] Randy Duncan and Michael J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2009), 28.

groundwork for the modern comic book industry.[13] It would be a company founded by a former army major, however, that took full advantage of the emerging industry. In 1934, Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson founded what would later become DC Comics, thereby laying the groundwork for the most famous creation of the comic book industry: the superhero.[14]

2.2 The Birth of a Genre: The Golden Age (1938-1949)

The beginning of the Golden Age of comics is one of the few things that most comic book scholars and fans can agree on. *Action Comics* v.1 #1, featuring the first appearance of Superman, appeared on newsstands in April of 1938, and thus the Golden Age was born. This age was notable for a number of reasons. First it created the archetype of the superhero and many of the conventions that accompanied it. Also, many of the characters created during the Golden Age remain in publication to this day, and their cultural impact is apparent in the multimillion-dollar movies still being made that feature their likenesses.

Superman was born out of a need to escape. The 1930s—the decade of his birth—were notoriously difficult. From the collapse of the global economy to the rise of fascism in Europe, and more local news like the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby, the American public was hungry for any source of escapism. With AM radio still in the chaos of infancy and network television nothing but a dream, this escapism came in the form of written works. It was into this tradition of written escapism that Jerry Siegel's Superman fell. Much has been written on the subject of Superman and, in particular, his creation. Authors have linked Superman's origin to heroes of Greek Myth such as Hercules and Jason and to early science fiction heroes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein and Lester Dent, John

[13] Duncan and Smith, *The Power of Comics*, 29-30
[14] Paul Levitz, *75 Years of DC Comics: The Art of Modern Mythmaking* (Koln, Germany: Taschen, 2010), 10.

Nanovic, and H. W. Ralston's Clark "Doc" Savage. The key aspect of Superman's character that made him so different from those that came before him was the fact that he combined the heroic tradition of the mythic characters with America's new favorite genre: science fiction.[15] By taking their inspiration from science-fiction pulp novels of the 1930s, Siegel and Shuster not only linked the comic book industry to the science fiction genre, but also set a precedent for drawing from pulp novels when creating a superhero.

Superman was originally a champion of social justice, fighting for the good of the common man against corrupt government officials and businessmen. This changed quickly as the public ceased to need a defender and champion from their own government and began to need protection from outside threats as America entered World War II.[16] To the US Government, comic books represented one of the best forms of propaganda. They were cheap and easy to produce, and they were directed at children, meaning they could be used to more easily convince them to support the war effort.

Some superheroes were created in direct response to the war, including Captain America. The first issue of *Captain America Comics* featured the titular hero punching Adolf Hitler in the face. At the time of its publication, the U.S. had not yet entered the war, and other popular comics were taking something of a cautious approach to the conflict in Europe. *Captain America Comics* was different from other publications because, as researcher J. Richard Stevens writes, Martin Goodman, the founder of Marvel Comics, "resolved as early as 1938 to use his company as an engine of anti-Nazi propaganda." In this way, he ensured that "those who were not

---

[15] Larry Tye, *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2012), 8-11.
[16] Jeffrey K. Johnson, "This Isn't Your Grandfather's Comic Book Universe: The Return of the Golden Age Superman," in *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, ed. Joseph J. Darowski (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Publishers Inc., 2012), 199-201.

educated in world affairs […] could comprehend and become involved in the struggle against the rising Nazi influence in Europe."[17] Nazis appeared as villains for heroes like The Human Torch and the Sub-Mariner as early as *Marvel Mystery Comics* #4 from 1940.[18]

Unlike other patriotic superheroes, Captain America was a "unique symbol of the values underpinning the republic," meaning he suggested the ideal of a man transformed into a superhero through the "injection of American ideals (the super-soldier serum)," and represented the best that America could be.[19] The Captain America of the Golden Age was extremely different from the Captain America of the modern day. Of the 269 stories that featured Captain America in the Golden Age, the villains of the story are killed as a direct result of Captain America's actions no less than 119 times. These villains were almost always Axis soldiers or Axis sympathizers, but Captain America was also extremely harsh with American citizens with whom he disagreed. For instance, in *Captain America Comics* #15 Captain America and his kid sidekick, Bucky, came across a member of the German American Bund claiming that it was impossible to resist the Axis. Disagreeing strongly with the man's point of view, Captain America punches him in the face. Perhaps more sinisterly, later in that same issue, Captain America and Bucky find a group of sailors saying they don't believe it is possible to defeat the Nazis. Again, Captain America steps in and violently objects. This sort of aggressive patriotism was unique to the Captain America of the Golden Age and is provided as an example of the type of propaganda that could be found in wartime comics and the expectations of wartime comic book readers.[20] To Captain America and those who read his comics, there was nothing more

---

[17] J. Richard Stevens, *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence: The Evolution of a National Icon* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 26.
[18] Stevens, *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence*, 26.
[19] Christopher J. Hayton and David L. Albright, "Oh Captain! My Captain!," in *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2009), 15.
[20] Stevens, Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence, 43-45.

important than defeating the Axis Powers, and seeing a hero meant to be representative of American values torturing and killing German and Japanese soldiers fit in that view without conflict.

Superman's stance on World War II was more complicated. In the comics, he was forced to take a more conservative stance than characters that were created specifically to fight in the war. While American men and superheroes alike were leaping into uniform and onto the frontlines, Superman stayed behind as his creators and editors worried about the impact that sending Superman into the war could have. When it came to lesser heroes like Captain America or Blackhawk, it was merely expected that they would take out an enemy fighter plane or aid American troops in battle. Superman, however, was expected to *end* the war, and his editors and creators feared that, should he enter the fray, readers would demand major results similar to what they saw in the pages of the comic. Conversely, if Superman were to fight in the war and fail to end it, then the supremacy of Superman's powers would come into question. If the Axis Powers would be shown to be more powerful than Superman (and thus more powerful than American forces), morale might sink on the home front and the front lines.[21]

No reason was given in the comic books for why Superman did not fight on the front lines, but the daily *Superman* newspaper strip revealed that Clark failed his physical due to accidently reading the eye chart in the room next to his thanks to his X-ray vision.[22] Instead of serving overseas, Superman could be found fighting Axis spies and saboteurs in his home city of Metropolis. Though the covers of Superman's comics from the war years showed the Man of Steel dismantling Nazi tanks or protecting soldiers against Japanese aircraft fire, the contents of the comics themselves rarely dealt directly with the war. Ultimately there were only two stories

[21] Tye, *Superman,* 58-59.
[22] Jerry Siegel (w), Wayne Boring (a), *Superman*, February 16-19, 1942, McClure Syndicate.

in which Superman intervened in real combat situations. The first, from *Superman* v.1 #22, involved Superman fighting a race of creatures called "Squiffles," who made a deal with Hitler to sabotage American aircraft. The second story came from *Superman* v.1 #24 in which Superman fought a Nazi military expedition in the Arctic.[23] More than anything, Superman gave the war effort exactly what he gave civilians on the home front: a way to escape the horrors of what was happening around them. *Superman* comics represented a familiar slice of home to the soldiers fighting on both the European and Pacific fronts, and that reminder would prove to be more valuable than any aid Superman could have provided by dismantling tanks and fighting on the front lines. The decision to keep Superman out of the war ultimately paid off as the war came to a close. Without a real-life war going on, comics like *Boy Commandos* and *Captain America Comics* declined in popularity, and many faded from view completely. Finding a role for the characters mired in a war that most Americans wanted to put behind them proved to be a difficult task, and Superman was able to maintain his popularity by remaining on the sidelines.[24]

Superman was not the only hero in DC Comics' roster to take something of a back seat to the war. Batman, for instance, took a very neutral stance on the war. The problem with explicitly including Batman in World War II was almost the opposite of the problem DC faced with Superman. While Superman was so powerful that he could end the war in a single afternoon, Batman was a single man, so it was quickly decided by DC's editors that Batman and Robin would be most useful on the Home Front.[25]

---

[23] Roy Thomas, "In for the Duration," in *Superman: The War Years 1938-1945*, ed. Michelle Faulkner and Frank Oppel (New York: Chartwell Books, 2015), 197-198.
[24] Tye, *Superman*, 60-64.
[25] Roy Thomas, "The Home Front War," in *Batman: The War Years 1939-1945*, ed. Michelle Faulkner and Frank Oppel (New York: Chartwell Books, 2015), 100.

When Axis agents began appearing in Batman comics, a vast majority of them were German agents rather than Japanese due in no small part to the government's "Germany first" policy. Though the general public may have wanted to get revenge on the Japanese for the attack on Pearl Harbor, the governments of both America and Britain agreed that Germany's Nazi war machine represented the bigger threat. Despite fighting a two-front war, it was therefore decided that the American Navy would hold the Japanese forces at bay in the Pacific while the rest of America's military worked to defeat the Nazis. Comics published in the immediate aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor contained a number of anti-Japanese sentiments, but enemies were quickly changed to Nazi agents a few months later.[26] Possibly the most war-related stories to be published in a *Batman* comic at this time came in *Batman* v.1 #14 and #15. "Swastika over the White House!" from *Batman* v.1 #14 told the story of Batman and Robin defeating Nazi spy who got a job as a newsreel cameraman in order to steal top secret weapons information and, in the process, discovering a map leading to the dismantling of a number of Nazi spy cells around the country.[27] "The Two Futures," from *Batman* v.1 #15 explored two possible futures for America after the end of the war. In one, Batman and Robin are executed by a Nazi death squad, while in the second the US military was able to defeat the Axis Powers, and the might of American industry was put toward "building a better world."[28]

The Golden Age was a time when the comic books and the superhero genre, both, came into their own. Following a rocky start in the realm of humor and animal stories, comic books found the most success with pulp-novel inspired superhero stories, and that success was only

---

[26] Thomas, "The Home Front War," 101.
[27] Don Cameron (w), and Jerry Robinson (p,i), "Swastika Over the White House," *Batman* v.1 #14 (January, 1943), Detective Comics Inc. [DC Comics]: [35-48].
[28] Jack Schiff (w), Bob Kane (p), and Jerry Robinson (i), "The Two Futures," Batman v.1 #15 (March, 1943), Detective Comics Inc. [DC Comics]: [33-46].

heightened by the role they played as Allied propaganda in World War II. Most conventions of both the comic book medium and the superhero genre were established during the Golden Age, including the creation of the superhero archetype, and a number of characters, such as Batman, Superman, and Captain America that have remained in publication since their creation in the 1930s or 1940s. Though the superhero genre as a whole declined after the end of World War II, the jumpstart that the genre gave to the infantile comic book industry allowed that industry to develop other genres of story-telling that would appeal to the public in the years following World War II.

2.3 The Decline of a Genre: The Atomic Age (1949-1956)

At the beginning of 1945, it was increasingly evident that there would be an Allied victory in World War II, and the popularity of superhero comics began to drop. By 1946, sales of superhero comics fell by a third. By 1949, the genre was all but dead.[29] Because the age system focused so heavily on superheroes, there is a gap in the chronology between the end of the Golden Age and the beginning of the Silver Age, stretching from approximately 1949 to 1956. Fans and scholars are increasingly calling this time the "Atomic Age" in an effort to acknowledge the supremacy of other genres of comics in these years.[30] Though western, romance, and science fiction comics were all immensely popular during this time, it was the crime and horror comics that reigned supreme. Many of these comics dealt with aspects of the Cold War, particularly the rise of atomic power.

---

[29] Stevens, *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence*, 57.

[30] *The Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide* seems to be the driving force behind the effort to include the Atomic Age in the larger system, but the term has been picked up by other official channels, including IDW Publishing. The inclusion of the Atomic Age is a point of contention among comic book fans.

As the Cold War dawned, comic book companies hoped that superheroes would be able to become just as popular as they had been in World War II, but it was not to be.[31] Patriotic heroes, such as Captain America, Shield, and Captain Battle, struggled to survive past the end of World War II. As characters designed to empower the American public through a global conflict, superheroes had done their job, and the public had no real use for them going into the Cold War. The invention of the atomic bomb in particular heralded the end of the supremacy of superheroes as the weapon's very existence served to reinforce ethnocentric ideals already held by much of the American public. To the public, the existence of the atomic bomb confirmed that God was on the side of the West. With that belief, the American public no longer needed superheroes to reassure them of their dominance in turbulent times, and superheroes began to look rather impotent when compared to the real-life power of atomic weapons.[32]

Simply put, in the 1950s there was less that people in America needed saving from. The Korean War conformed to the rules of the Cold War, meaning that the superhero formula of the 1940s was unable to capitalize on the conflict in the same way as it had World War II.[33] Between 1953 and 1955, the company that would later become Marvel Comics attempted to revive the superhero genre by enlisting its best-selling heroes from World War II—Captain America, The Sub-Mariner, and the Human Torch—in the fight against Communism. *Captain America Comics* continued from where they had left off (issue #76), with the titular character being reintroduced as "Captain America … Commie Smasher!" a staunch McCarthyite. In reprising his role as the protector of the American home front, Captain America stressed that Communists were evil, but he failed to address the nuances of the Cold War beyond simple dogmatism. This version of

---

[31] Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 121.
[32] Stevens, *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence*, 57-58.
[33] Stevens, *Captain America, Masculinity, and* Violence, 68-69.

Captain America only lasted for three issues before Atlas's attempt at reviving the genre failed, and the series was once again canceled, this time at issue #78. The Communist forces featured in the Commie Smasher comics (as fans refer to them) were different from the Nazis faced by Captain America in the Golden Age. While the Nazis were obviously and loudly anti-American, the Communists engaged in nefarious double-talk.[34] Marvel later disavowed the 1950s version of Captain America, with writer Steve Englehart labelling him a false Captain America who appeared while the real Captain America was frozen between his final appearance in the Golden Age and his first appearance in the Silver Age. Marvel's disowning of the Commie Smasher comics "reflected the changing political climate of post-McCarthy America, in which McCarthyite Americanism was deemed to be false patriotism."[35]

As the popularity of more realistic crime comics demonstrated, the postwar comic book market had grown up and, as historian Bradford W. Wright writes, "comic book makers overestimated the size of the audience prepared to accept such naïve presentations of the Cold War."[36] Crucially, the Commie Smasher Captain America stories and other anti-Communist superheroes did not engage at all with Cold War political ideology beyond the basic "Communists are evil" propaganda. Nineteen-fifties superheroes were well aware of the consequences awaiting the West should the Communists be allowed to expand across the world. As such, anti-communists superheroes were allowed to utilize extreme violence in their efforts to combat the Soviet threat. "Merely neutralizing Soviet agents—or, for that matter, Soviet armies—served no good purpose, given the stakes in the game; so homicide, and not infrequently

[34] Stevens, *Captain America, Masculinity, and* Violence, 61-62.
[35] Jason Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no.3 (Sep. 2005): 632.
[36] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 123.

genocide, became reasonable and acceptable undertakings for comic-book operatives."[37] This overly simplistic view of the Cold War held little appeal to the general public, and these types of stories suffered as a result. Comics that approached the issues of the Cold War with more realism than fantasy found a robust market in the 1950s.

Perhaps one of the more unexpected results of the Cold War in comics was the creation and fast rise in popularity of the romance comic book genre. A great deal of emphasis was placed on the traditional nuclear family structure in the 1950s as it represented "the affluence, consumption, and spiritual fulfillment that the American way of life promised."[38] Thus, preservation of more traditional family and gender roles became interwoven with concerns about national security and created a domestic form of the containment policy. These strict gender and family roles naturally had the most impact on women, as girls were expected to marry young and assume their roles as doting mothers, supportive wives, and dedicated homemakers. One of the most obvious proponents of these gender roles were the romance comics. First introduced by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, the original creators of Captain America, the comic *Young Romance* appeared in 1947 and was an immediate success. After selling out its initial print run, *Young Romance* gave rise to hundreds of competing titles, until there were nearly 100 romance titles on the market. Simon and Kirby initially created *Young Romance* to appeal to the long neglected female readers and, like crime comics that took inspiration from newspaper headlines, romance comics got story ideas from confessional magazines.[39]

The Cold War encouraged the development of war comics alongside romance comics. Both genres purported to be educational and patriotic, and there was a significant degree of

[37] Stevens, *Captain America, Masculinity, and* Violence, 68.
[38] Wright*, Comic Book Nation*, 127.
[39] Wright*, Comic Book Nation*, 127-133.

overlap between them. Romance comics often included stories of Army nurses falling in love with soldiers in the Korean War, or tales of sweethearts remaining true to their boyfriends who got drafted. Despite appealing to large numbers of readers, parents tended to disapprove of war comics. The Cincinnati Committee on the Evaluation of Comic Books found war comics to be objectionable due to the violence found within the stories, which was the same objection they had to crime comics. However, war comics were also found to be problematic on the grounds that they often portrayed the Korean War as being a hopeless situation, and such depictions could dissuade young men from enlisting. Apparently exposing readers to fictionalized violence was dangerous but exposing those same readers to real life violence was fine. Thus, superhero comics that solved the problem of Communism too easily were unpopular with readers, but comics that addressed the Cold War in more serious ways were panned by critics and parents despite being extremely popular with readers. Anticommunism appeared, at first, to be a noble cause that comic book makers and superheroes could easily endorse but, as the audience demanded that their anxieties about the Cold War be indulged rather than ignored, comic book creators were forced to reveal the contradictions inherent in the Cold War. Though the messages of the Korean War comics were still anticommunist, comic book creators had a hard time presenting an encouraging image of the conflict. Thus, while the comic books of the late 1940s and early 1950s endorsed the policy of containment, they also, unintentionally, "gave children an early lesson in the exasperation of waging the Cold War."[40]

2.4 The Rebirth of a Genre: The Silver Age (1956-1970)

Following the drastic reduction in sales of superhero comics, the genre as a whole was, for the most part, left to gather dust in favor of other genres. It was only in 1956 that the

[40] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 133-134.

superhero genre came back in any meaningful way thanks, in part, to the Comics Code Authority, making 1956 the "official" start of the Silver Age. In 1953, the United States Senate established a subcommittee to investigate the causes of juvenile delinquency. In a series of public hearings in June, 1954, comic book publishers testified before the Senate about both the content of their books and the potentially harmful effects those books may have had on the children.[41] Those hearings featured testimony from a number of experts in both the comic book industry and the world of psychology, but only two individuals merit special attention. The first, Dr. Fredric Wertham, a psychiatrist from New York, wrote a number of anti-comics pieces for various magazines before writing *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he made a number of claims about the effects comics were having on children. Among other things, Wertham claimed that crime comics were the root cause of juvenile delinquency and that *Batman* and *Wonder Woman* in particular could cause children and teens to stress about the possibility that they might be gay.[42] *Seduction of the Innocent* was part of a larger post-World War II concern about the changing trends in comic book publishing. As noted above, the superhero genre became less popular following World War II, and other genres that publishers hoped would appeal to more mature readers gained dominance. Though the more violent crime and war comics were meant to be read by more mature readers, there was no system in place to stop children from reading them.[43]

Wertham might have been the expert witness in the Senate testimony, but it was William Gaines's testimony that received the most media attention. In his testimony, Gaines attempted to

---

[41] "Comic Book Hearings Set," New York Times, May 27, 1954, 15.
[42] Today, Wertham is remembered for his role in the creation of the Comics Code Authority, but his career included many other notable moments, such as testifying in the trial of the cannibalistic serial killer, Albert Fish, in 1935 and attempted, unsuccessfully, to secure psychiatric treatment for Ethel Rosenberg before her execution in 1953.
[43] Carol L. Tilly, "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications that Helped Condemn Comics," *Information & Culture* 47, no. 4 (2012): 384.

demonstrate that the questionable content of the horror and crime comics published by EC was in good taste.[44] Ultimately, the Senate committee did not come to any conclusions about the role of comic books in juvenile delinquency and did not propose any legislation to censor comics, but the hearings prompted the comic book industry to "adopt a strict self-regulatory code to which most of the publishers would adhere."[45] Thus, the hearings convinced the industry to do what years of criticism and more local threats failed to do. The Kefauver hearings always intended to force the comic book industry to start regulating its own content as crime and horror comics almost immediately disappeared from the shelves following the implementation of the Code.[46]

There was a shift in the tone and content of comics following the introduction of the Comics Code Authority, but this shift had less to do with restrictions imposed by the Code, and more to do with the dominant trends in fiction at the time. As the space race began, the Space Age in fiction came into being. Stories about aliens, robots, and monsters from outer space overtook stories of crime and violence. This shift in the zeitgeist meant that superhero comics had to change to more science fiction types of stories if they wanted to remain relevant. For some heroes like Superman, Green Lantern, and the Flash, this was easy as their powers and backstories lent themselves easily to the science fiction genre. For heroes like Batman, however, the shift to science fiction was extremely noticeable, since the crime and violence that was so prevalent in his Golden Age stories gave way to more and more plots involving "aliens, robots, monsters, and more than a few alien robot monsters [….] Batman rocketed into outer space without a second thought and continued to hop back and forth in time like he was changing subway trains."[47]

---

[44] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 61-63.
[45] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 83.
[46] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 84.
[47] Weldon, *The Caped Crusade*, 57.

DC Comics editor Julius Schwartz used this shift toward science fiction to bring a number of Golden Age superheroes out of retirement. Though their names remained the same, heroes like The Flash, Green Lantern, and the Atom that were reintroduced in the late 1950s often bore little to no resemblance to the heroes of the same name from the Golden Age.[48] For instance, the Golden Age Green Lantern was an engineer named Alan Scott, who survived a train crash thanks to a magical lantern and ring before becoming a superhero.[49] The Silver Age Green Lantern, however, was a test pilot named Hal Jordan, who received his ring and lantern from a dying alien and was inducted into a universe-spanning peace-keeping force.[50]

Marvel entered the 1960s with only a handful of comic titles. Before 1958, Marvel had essentially one employee, Stanley Lieber (better known as Stan Lee), who helped create a number of Marvel's most enduring characters, including The Fantastic Four and Spider-Man.[51] Created as a last-ditch effort to save the failing anthology book, *Amazing Fantasy*, Spider-Man was a notable success for Marvel. The teenage Peter Parker provided an instant point of relation for readers as he experienced rejection, inadequacy and loneliness. Like others in Marvel's new roster of heroes, Spider-Man shunned long held conventions of the superhero genre by not making a noble pledge to fight for the good of humanity.[52] Another of Marvel's superhero offerings from the 1960s that would go on to be extremely popular were the X-Men, a group of teenage mutants who worked to save a world that hated them from other mutants that would use their powers to harm humanity. The ambiguity that Marvel introduced into the superhero genre was a product of the anxieties of Cold War culture. These heroes were not adored by the general

---

[48] Weldon, *The Caped Crusade,* 58.
[49] Bill Finger (w), Martin Nodell (p, i), "The Origin of Green Lantern," *All-American Comics* v.1 #16 (July, 1940), All-American Comics, Inc. [DC Comics]: [2-9].
[50] John Broome (w), Gil Kane (p), Joe Giella (i), "S.O.S Green Lantern!" *Showcase* v.1 #22 (October, 1959), National Comics Publications [DC Comics]: [2-7].
[51] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 201-204.
[52] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 210-212.

public and, in the case of the X-Men and Spider-Man, were often openly hated and persecuted by authorities. “The rejection of consensus and conformity found expression in superheroes who were misunderstood by the public and persecuted by authorities,” while anxieties about the role that radiation would play in society were exemplified by characters like The Thing and The Hulk.[53]

As with the Human Torch and the Sub-Mariner from the 1940s, Marvels’ new heroes faced realistic problems in addition to the supervillain plots they foiled. For instance, the Silver Age Human Torch quit the Fantastic Four because he was tired of the older members of the team bossing him around, and the Invisible Girl often let thoughts of romance cloud her judgement.[54] The new generation of superheroes were not only inspired by science fiction, but also brought a level of complexity to the genre that had been absent in World War II. That complexity would only increase in later ages as comic book companies attempted to make their publications seem more sophisticated and literary in order to appeal to older, more mature audiences. Complex characters made for complex storylines, and the upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s gave creators plenty of material from which to draw inspiration. This turn to the complex would be the defining feature of later ages and marked the transition from the Silver Age to the Bronze Age.

2.5 The Evolution of a Medium: The Bronze Age (1970-1985)

Though technically an invention of the late Silver Age, the impact of underground comics (or comix) movement can most clearly be felt starting in the Bronze Age. Published outside of the normal distribution channels of the comic book industry, underground comix were not subject to the same legal requirements as the big corporations. Most notably, these publications

[53] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 215-217.
[54] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 204-205.

were not subject to the Comics Code Authority. As such, these publications were free to depict things that were forbidden by the Comics Code without worrying about losing distribution outlets or readers. “These comics were perceptive reflections of the anti-war, anti-establishment fervor of the times,” and “arose at a critical time when the convergence of political repression, the protest movement, psychedelic drugs, and innovations in printing technology created the right mix for an impromptu and improvised art movement.”[55] The creators of these comics were heavily influenced by major events of the 1960s and used those events to inspire the publications they created. It was *Zap Comix* #1 that brought the movement together in 1968, and 1968 is thus widely regarded as the beginning of the movement as a whole, despite the fact that illegal or dubiously legal publications were not a new phenomenon. By 1973, there were over 300 new comic titles in print, and the insistence on complete artistic freedom not only revitalized the larger comic book industry, but also allowed comics to reclaim the adult audience by addressing provocative topics.[56]

One group who took full advantage of the freedom afforded by the Underground Comix movement was queer artists and writers. Overt depictions of homosexuality were forbidden by the Comics Code until 1989, but underground comix gave queer writers and artists an outlet for artistic and political expression. This freedom of political expression allowed queer creators to comment on issues unique to them, such as the AIDS crisis, with a viewpoint and compassion that writers in the larger comic book industry could never hope to accomplish.[57] These comics were written by queer people for a queer audience and thus addressed aspects of the queer

[55] Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions,* 15.
[56] Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions*, 15.
[57] Justin Hall, introduction to *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics* (Seattle, Washington: Fantagraphics Books, 2013).

experience that were completely foreign to straight or cisgendered creators.[58] The media ghetto in which Queer comics found themselves has only recently begun to be dismantled, as more Queer characters were introduced to mainstream comics in the Dark Age and the Aluminum Age but, for a long time, the backbone of the queer comics movement was *Gay Comix* (called "*Gay Comics*" after issue #6), created by Howards Cruse explicitly for the Queer community.[59]

The underground comix movement did not last particularly long and, by 1973, a number of outside forces worked together to strip the underground comix movement of much of its power. Supreme Court rulings about local standards on pornography and nationwide reductions in the number of head shops worked to reduce the circulation of magazines, and "peace with honor" in Vietnam put an end to the anti-war movement that had fueled so many underground comix artists.[60] As readership of underground comix dropped in the mid-1970s, publishers began to be more cautious in regards to the content they printed.[61] "The underground comix movement was about both action and reaction – advocating revolution in the streets and sexual freedom, but also springing from a post war suburban angst and a fatalism steeped in atomic bomb drills."[62] The legacy of the movement was far more important than the content of the books produced by artists within it, as the complete creative control that underground comix artists exercised over their creations later inspired the pioneers in the push for Independent Comics.

The political messages of underground comix made their way into mainstream comic books in the 1970s as superheroes became more realistic, and superheroes began to confront problems that were present in the real world as well as the fictional one. The most famous book

[58] Hall, introduction to *No Straight Lines*.
[59] Hall, introduction to *No Straight Lines*.
[60] Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions*, 185.
[61] Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions*, 205.
[62] Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions*, 221.

to address real-life issues of the time was *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*. This series addressed everything from urban poverty, to due process in the judicial system, to the drug epidemic. The realism portrayed in the storylines from the *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series inspired and influenced artists and writers in the Dark Age as the comic book continued to become more and more realistic in its scope.[63]

The Bronze Age saw the first real challenges to the Comics Code Authority as more and more real-life events began appearing in comic books. As the Comic Code often limited how explicit a comic could be in its handling of issues from the real world, some comics were published without Code approval. Such comics included *Amazing Spider-Man* #96-98 from 1971. An anti-drug story written (apparently) by Stan Lee himself, these issues were published without Code approval because any depiction of drug use, good or bad, was forbidden by the Code.[64] Other comics followed suit and began including stories about the dangers of illegal drugs, including a now famous two issue arc in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow,* in which it was revealed that Green Arrow's teenage sidekick, Speedy, had developed a heroin addiction.[65] Shunning the approval of the Comics Code would become commonplace during the Dark Age, and two of the books that would help to shape the era were published entirely without such approval.[66]

Other major events like the Vietnam War and Watergate made their way into the plots of the socially conscious Marvel Comics. In the Silver Age, one of the biggest appeals of Marvel Comics was the more realistic nature of the characters, and this continued in the Bronze Age.[67]

---

[63] Voger, *The Dark Age,* 12.
[64] Voger, *The Dark Age,* 12.
[65] Dennis O'Neil (w), Neal Adams (p, i), and Dick Giordano (i), "Snowbirds Don't Fly," *Green Lantern* v.2 #85-86 (August/September-October/November, 1971), National Periodical Publications Inc. [DC Comics].
[66] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval,* 139.
[67] Paul Young, *Frank Miller's Daredevil and the Ends of Heroism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 21-22.

For instance, in 1974, at the height of the Watergate investigations, Marvel published a storyline in which Captain America fought a subversive organization called the Secret Empire. At the end of the storyline, in *Captain America* v.1 #175, the leader of the Secret Empire was revealed to be a high-ranking official in the US Government who, after being exposed as part of the Secret Empire, committed suicide in front of Captain America.[68]

Though the government official was never named, the fact that he killed himself in the Oval Office implied that the official was none other than Richard Nixon, a fact that was later confirmed by the writer, Steve Englehart.[69] Disillusioned by the corruption at the highest levels of government and "faced with an America where private ambitions were being filtered through third parties and packaged as public interest, [Captain America] was forced to question whether even his own symbolic authority was complicit with political corruption."[70] No longer able to support a country whose morals were so far removed from his own, Steve Rogers gave up the title of "Captain America" in favor of the title "Nomad, the Man Without a Country." By issue #183, Captain America was forced to return to his original superhero identity and lamented that "the people who had custody of the American Dream had abused both it and us," and there was, in his opinion, no way he could have continued to act as Captain America because the people who were supposed to be in charge of America's government were no better than the Nazis he fought in World War II.[71]

---

[68] Steve Englehart (w), Sal Buscema (p), and Vince Colletta (i), "Before the Dawn!," *Captain America* v.1 #175 (July, 1974), Marvel Comics.
[69] David Walton, "'Captain America Must Die: The Many Afterlives of Steve Rogers," in *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2009), 164.
[70] Walton, "Captain America," 164.
[71] Steve Englehart (w), Frank Robbins (p), and Frank Giacoia (i), "Nomad: No More," *Captain America* v.1 #183 (March, 1975), Marvel Comics.

Over the course of a handful of panels, Captain America realized that it was not the ideals of America that had failed him; it was he who had failed the ideals of America. After coming to the conclusion that the ideals he stood for were bigger than any government official, he put the Captain America costume back on and vowed to continue fighting for "the dream [the country] was built on, not the deadwood thrown on top!"[72] The entire Secret Empire/Nomad saga acted as a mirror to the feelings of many Americans in the wake of Watergate, as it became apparent that elected officials did not always represent the best interests and attitudes of the general populace. This political commentary served to give Captain America realistic problems as readers could see their own problems reflected in the character who, up to that point had not had any reason to question the motives of the people in charge of America's government. The Aluminum Age would see more of this questioning by Captain America as he found himself at odds with a number of the post-9/11 policies of the US Government.

It was thanks to the realism first introduced in the underground comix movement that the comic book industry was able to build any sort of literary reputation. As publications by underground comix artists began entering the mainstream market—and their economic success encouraged mainstream comic artists to include more realistic plotlines and issues in their publications—the literary world was forced to confront the literary merit of comic books. Works that came to define the Dark Age by writers like Alan Moore and Frank Miller built off this realism to add complexity and literary merit to superheroes. Over the course of the late twentieth century, comic books changed from cheap publications that were given away for free, to a respected piece of popular culture with some of the publications gaining the respect of literary

[72] Steve Englehart (w), Herb Trimple (p), Frank Giacoia and Mike Esposito (i), "Cap's Back!" *Captain America* v.1 #184 (April, 1975), Marvel Comics.

critics. This development continued through the 1980s and 1990s as changes to the medium and the industry enabled more artistic freedom and greater sales numbers than ever before.

3 "TIME TO FINALLY NAME THIS ERA OF UNKINDER, UNGENTLER COMIC BOOK HEROES": THE DARK AGE (1985-2001)

In 1996, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* turned ten years old, and author Mark Voger wrote an article in *Comics Buyer's Guide* #1252 to commemorate the event. In this article, Voger finally gave a name to what was, at the time, the newest age of comics: the Dark Age.[73] It was a time unlike any other in the history of comic books, when sales numbers reached new heights even if the literary merits of the books did not. The realistic aspects of Bronze Age comics evolved into revisionism thanks to works like Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (*TDKR*). These works applied real world psychologies to superheroes, and violence and psychosis were often the results. Between 1984 and 1986, four comic series were published that would lay the groundwork for the Dark Age as a whole. DC Comics' *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (*CoIE*), *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, and *Watchmen* along with Marvel Comics' *Secret Wars* were all best sellers and dramatically changed the way that comics were written and marketed by introducing the concept of the "event book" and creating compelling, standalone stories that readers could pick up at their leisure with no prior knowledge of the characters. By the early 1990s, revisionism was the dominant mode of storytelling in the superhero genre, and revisionist comics often experimented with new artistic formats and narrative techniques. However, as researchers Kevin Thurman and Julian Darius

[73] Voger, *The Dark Age*, 6.

pointed out, these comics also "often preserved the violence without revisionism's intelligence."[74]

3.1 The Rise of the Independents

Founded by some of the biggest names at Marvel Comics in 1992, Image Comics represented a new direction for the comic book industry: the creator-owned series. The comic book industry has been the subject of a number of disputes concerning creator rights, and most of those disputes centered around whether the creator of a character owns the rights to that character and are thus entitled to a portion of the profits made off that character.[75] Image Comics was founded by Rob Liefeld, Jim Valentino, Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee, Erik Larsen, Marc Silvestri, and Whilce Portacio as an alternative to the two biggest names in the comics industry, DC Comics and Marvel Comics. The seven founders of Image revitalized Marvel Comics when they joined the company in 1987. Under the new editor-in-chief, Tom DeFalco, Image's founders were responsible for creating characters and penning stories that would have long lasting impacts on both the comic book industry and the in-fiction Marvel universe.[76]

Many of these stories were also among the highest selling books of the Dark Age. In 1990 McFarlane's *Spider-Man* #1 sold almost three million copies. One year later, Liefeld's *X-Force* #1 sold nearly five million copies, and later that year both of those books were outpaced by Jim Lee's *X-Men* v.2 #1, which sold close to eight million. Image's other founders had similar results with their projects and, at least for a while, there seemed to be harmony between the

---

[74] Kevin Thurman and Julian Darius, *Voyage in Noise: Warren Ellis and the Demise of Western Civilization* (Edwardsville, Illinois: Sequart Research & Literacy Organization, 2013), 36, Kindle.
[75] Alan Moore famously stopped writing for DC Comics in 1988 due to disputes over the creative rights to *Watchmen*, and Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel sued DC Comics for adequate compensation in the 1970s. More recently, the estate of Jack Kirby has sued Marvel Comics for a portion of the profits from movies featuring characters that Kirby had a hand in creating.
[76] George Khoury, *Image Comics: The Road to Independence* (Raleigh, North Carolina: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2007), 10.

creators and the editors. That harmony would not last, however, as merchandise featuring the work of these superstar creators was soon flying off the shelves, and the creators did not receive a penny in royalties. In addition to conflicts over merchandising and international licensing, Image's creators soon found themselves clashing with Marvel's editors over the stories of their books. These artists and writers already received generous royalties for their work, and they were household names among comic fans, but the restrictions of working for a public corporation and the interference of their superiors frustrated Marvel's superstar creators.[77]

Free from the restraints of the larger comic book industry, Image's creators were free to explore more controversial topics much like their predecessors in the Underground Comix movement. Though the Comics Code was stripped of many of its restrictions following the 1989 revision, creators working for Marvel and DC Comics still had to conform to editorial mandates and outside pressures that independent publishers could avoid. In theory, this would lead to some of the most thought provoking and groundbreaking narratives in the graphic narrative genre but, in reality, many of Image's early books were overly violent and suffered from inexperienced creators; again, much like the Underground Comix of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Image's books sold quickly and in vast numbers as the creators behind those books exploited market trends to their fullest extent.

The impact Image had on the comic industry as a whole was immense even if the road was rocky at times. The books that Image's creators published had production values that vastly outstripped the competition, and fans could tell the creators believed in the books as much as they did.[78] Despite its immense popularity, even Image Comics was not immune to the larger economic forces of the comic book industry. By the mid-1990s, both Liefeld and Lee had

[77] Khoury, *Image Comics: The Road to Independence,* 11.
[78] Khoury, *Image Comics: The Road to Independence,* 13-14.

returned to work at Marvel, having been given complete creative and editorial control over the books they produced, something that was unthinkable in the years before Image. The days of selling hundreds of thousands of copies of a book were long gone by 1998, however, and Image was forced to turn to independent and alternative creators that did not necessarily want to write superhero books.[79] Image Comics both proved a number of long held superstitions about the comic book industry and effectively demonstrated that individual creators had fans like the characters they created. Some fans were just as likely to buy a book because of who wrote it as they were because of what character was in it. More than anything, however, the rise in independent publishing proved to both publishers and creators that comic books that did not feature superheroes could be successful. Some of Image's most well-known and acclaimed series in the early twenty-first century, in fact, fell outside the bounds of the superhero genre.

3.2 Dark Age Conventions

3.2.1 Token Diversity

Just as the Bronze Age began to introduce more diversity to the cast of characters regularly featured in comic books with characters like Luke Cage and Black Panther, the Dark Age took that to the extreme with the introduction of still more minority characters and the . These characters undoubtedly improved the surface level diversity of the stories in which they featured, but rarely was any attention paid to the worldviews and situations that minority characters could bring to the stories. This lack of attention to the experiences and world views of minorities made the inclusion of such characters seem hollow and self-serving, as though the two biggest names in the comic book industry were simply trying to see who could boast of having the most diverse cast without putting any real effort into developing said cast.

[79] Khoury, *Image Comics: The Road to Independence,* 15.

Queer characters were slower to be introduced than other minorities because of the Comics Code Authority. In the original text of the 1954 version of the Code, points two and seven of the "Marriage and Sex" section in Part C of the Code's General Standards[80] forbade the inclusion of queer characters.[81] It was not until the Code was revised in 1989 that queer characters were allowed to appear openly in Code-approved comics. Women's Studies professor, Kara Kvaran claimed "the gay liberation movement of the 1970s bypassed superhero comics" because of these restrictions.[82] Even after the Code's restrictions were removed, it took almost four years for DC and Marvel to start including queer characters in their mainstream publications.

Under the assumption that queer characters did not appeal to their key demographic and fearful of offending anti-gay activist groups, Marvel and DC were hesitant to include queer characters in their main publications, and those characters that did appear usually had their stories told in their adult-only publishing imprints, such as Vertigo and Marvel Max.[83] Comic creators were not attempting to foster any sort of anti-gay sentiment in their books by excluding queer characters. Rather, according to writer John Ostrander, "comics [were] ignoring gays, but I don't think anybody [tried] to show them in a bad light. Now whether or not comics show any sensitivity to gays is a whole other issue."[84] This attitude would begin to change in the

---

[80] Point two read "Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at nor portrayed. Violent love scenes as well as sexual abnormalities are unacceptable," while point seven said "sex perversion or any inference to the same is strictly prohibited."
[81] "The Comics Code of 1954," Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, accessed October 16, 2019, cbldf.org/the-comics-code-of-1954/.
[82]Kara Kvaran, "SuperGay: Depictions of Homosexuality in Mainstream Superhero Comics," in *Comics as History Comics as Literature: Roles of the Comic Book in Scholarship, Society, and Entertainment*, ed. Annessa Ann Babic (Lanham, Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014), chap. 9, Kindle.
[83] Kvaran, "SuperGay," chap. 9.
[84] Andy Mangels, "Out of the Closet and into the Comics: Gays in Comics: The Creations and the Creators Part 1," *Amazing Heroes* #143, June 15, 1988, 39.

Aluminum Age as more queer characters were introduced and given more significant roles in mainstream publications.

The first attempt to include explicitly queer characters in a mainstream publication from either Marvel or DC came in the pages of *The Hulk Magazine* #23 when a pair of men attempted to rape Bruce Banner in the showers of a YMCA. Written by Jim Shooter, this story was called "sick and twisted in its sexuality" by writer Marv Wolfman, and it sparked a number of letters to Shooter, most of which expressed a negative attitude toward the story.[85] Independent publications, such as *Sabre* from Eclipse Comics, had better responses to both their inclusion of gay characters and the quality of the representation provided by those characters, and *Sabre* in particular featured the first instances of same-sex physical affection in a mainstream comic in 1983.[86]

It would take another nine years for gay characters to make their way into the world of the superheroes. It was not until 1992 that the first openly gay superhero appeared in comics. Northstar revealed he was gay in *Alpha Flight* v.1 #106 after becoming attached to a child born with AIDS.[87] Between 1979 and 1992, writers John Bryne and Bill Mantlo made several indirect, easily ignored references to Northstar being gay. The most obvious reference to Northstar's sexuality before he officially came out as gay came in the form of a "mysterious illness" that he first started displaying symptoms of in *Alpha Flight* v.1 #44. Mantlo believed that enough hints were dropped that the readers would be able to determine for themselves that the disease that afflicted Northstar was AIDS, but he was careful to never call the disease "AIDS." When Marvel's Editor-in-Chief, Jim Shooter, heard about the plot, he forbade Mantlo from both killing

[85] Mangels, "Out of the Closet Part 1," 40.
[86] Mangels, "Out of the Closet Part 1," 40-41.
[87] Scott Lobdell (w), Mark Pacella (p), and Dan Panosian (i), "The Walking Wounded," Alpha Flight v.1 #106 (March, 1992), DC Comics.

Northstar with AIDS, and from portraying Northstar as an explicitly gay character due to the potential for controversy among more conservative readers. As a result, any hint of homosexuality or AIDS was scrubbed from the story.[88] Marvel would not allow Northstar to live as an openly gay man, but they also would not allow him to die from a disease that was only circumstantially linked to the queer community.

3.2.2 Sales Gimmicks

At the height of the Great Depression, comic book publishers began offering their wares as supplements in bigger, more useful mediums such as almanacs, and such comics often acted as advertisements for causes, politicians, or products. Eventually, these promotional comics came to be used as a tool for education as well as advertising a particular product or service. The 1970s and 1980s saw a boom in the use of comic book characters being used as advertising tools. "Every product imaginable seemed to have a licensing deal with a comic book character, usually one of the prominent flag bearers of the Big Two, Marvel or DC."[89] For instance, Captain America worked with the Campbell Kids, while Superman used Radio Shack computers to help a class of computer students defeat a villain. Other promotional comics were used for educational purposes as superheroes warned children about the dangers of smoking, drugs,[90] and even the AIDS Crisis.[91]

The Dark Age brought promotional and special edition comics back to the forefront of the collector market via the use of polybags. Comic books that came in a polybag essentially

---

[88] Mangels, "Out of the Closet Part 1," 43-44.
[89] Arnold T. Blumberg, "Promotional Comics: The Marketing of a Medium," in *The Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*, 48th ed., ed. Robert Overstreet (Hunt Valley, Maryland: Gemstone Publishing, 2018), 308.
[90] Captain America addressed the War on Drugs in a series of free promotional comics aptly called "Captain America Goes to War against Drugs," from 1991, and DC's Teen Titans were featured in three promotional comics published in cooperation with the President's Drug Awareness Campaign in 1983.
[91] DC Comics ran a series of ads in 1993 that featured popular heroes educating children about the realities of the AIDS Crisis and combatting the misinformation that readers may have encountered.

ensured that collectors would buy two copies of the same book, one to open and read and one to keep in pristine condition, and such books usually came with a trading card or poster as a bonus. Easily the most famous polybagged book was *Superman* v.2 #75. It was in this issue that Superman "died" in his final battle against the monster Doomsday, and the issue came packaged with a number of extras for collectors: a black armband for those who wanted to mourn the death of the Man of Steel, a poster, a trading card, an obituary, and stickers. Though most polybagged comics came only with a poster or trading card, some were extremely extravagant and justified a higher cover price. For instance, the polybagged edition of *Batman: Shadow of the Bat* #1 included a "three-dimensional Arkham Asylum popup, an Arkham blueprint, two posters, and a special edition bookmark," meaning that the polybagged edition was bound to have a higher cover price than the "vanilla" edition.[92]

Alongside polybags, comics from the Dark Age often featured a series of increasingly elaborate cover enhancements and extras that could be used to artificially inflate the price and rarity of a given comic. These cover enhancements generally took the form of metallic foil or holographic pictures or words on the cover, though the *Superman* family of comics after Superman's death in 1992 (*Superman* v.2 #78, *Superman: Man of Steel* v.1 #22, *The Adventures of Superman* v.1 #501, and *Action Comics* v.1 #687), featured cover enhancements in the form of a die-cut hole in the covers in the shape of Superman's iconic shield.[93] The comic book market of the Dark Age used polybags and cover enhancements to cater almost exclusively to speculators and completionist collectors.

From the very beginning, death was a part of the Dark Age. From Barry Allen's death in *COIE* and the six-page destruction of an entire city at the end of *Watchmen,* to the death of

[92] Voger, *The Dark Age*, 130.
[93] Voger, *The Dark Age*, 130.

Superman in the early 1990s, it soon became apparent that no character—no matter how beloved or profitable—was safe from death in the Dark Age. One of the most famous deaths in the Dark Age of comic books was that of Jason Todd. In 1983 Jason Todd became Robin, Batman's sidekick; in 1988, Jason Todd was killed by The Joker after readers voted by phone on whether the 15-year-old should survive or succumb to the Joker's attack. This came as part of a concentrated effort by DC Comics to make Batman a darker, more serious figure that was sparked by the success of *TDKR*.[94]

Over the following years, attempts to deconstruct the character of Batman in the same way that Frank Miller had in *TDKR* simply led to writers increasing body counts until even Batman's own allies were no longer safe from harm. Most fans of Batman seemed to think that these dark storylines legitimized their hero in some way. By making the stories darker (often both metaphorically, through the content, and literally, as the artwork darkened to fit the tone of the story), fans believed that *Batman* comics were going to be taken seriously. "Sure, Batman may have been created for children, but Frank Miller […] had brought him into the real world, a place of bloody violence and stark sexuality, and now, finally, everybody would see him for the badass the fans had always known him to be."[95] Jason Todd's death haunted Batman through the next few years, and the event was used to explain why Batman was suddenly becoming such a dark and serious book. In fact, though Dennis O'Neil oversaw the killing of Jason Todd, Miller was at least partially to blame as he introduced the idea of Jason dying in *TDKR* as part of the reason his version of Batman was so dark and tortured. Fans leapt at the chance to see part of

[94] Weldon, *The Caped Crusade*, 146.
[95] Weldon, *The Caped Crusade*, 146.

Miller's work become canon in the main comics, and Jason's fate was sealed before he had the chance to fight back.[96]

Even Batman himself was not safe from the trend of murdering or crippling characters as, in *Batman* v.1 #497, the villain Bane broke Batman's back in a now iconic image. With his back broken, Bruce Wayne was unable to continue in his role as Batman, so he gave the costume to a Jean-Paul Valley who, until taking up the role of Batman, was the anti-hero Azrael. Dennis O'Neil was pleased with the boost to sales that Valley's appearance gave *Batman*, but he feared that this version of Batman would become more popular that Bruce Wayne's version. "Azrael was always meant to serve as an object lesson, a sarcastic comment on the predominant mood, not to become the Sensational Character Find of 1993 [sic]."[97] "KnightSaga," as fans christened the event, spanned over one hundred issues of eight different comic series before its end. Despite being a larger event in terms of the number of series and issues involved, KnightSaga failed to garner anything close to the media attention generated by the death of either Superman or Jason Todd. It seemed that crippling Batman was simply not dramatic enough to attract outside attention or even to hold the attention of those within the insular comic book culture. Even the death of the most famous superhero of all time would prove to be insufficient to maintain the interest of finicky fans.[98]

According to Superman's writers at the time, killing the Man of Steel was an idea that they pitched annually as a joke. In 1992, however, the writing team found themselves at a loss of what to do with Superman. DC editorial forbade them from marrying Superman and Lois Lane despite the fact they were engaged because of the profit potential in having Superman get

[96] Weldon, *The Caped Crusade*, 150.
[97] Weldon, *The Caped Crusade*, 193.
[98] Weldon, *The Caped Crusade*, 194.

married in the comics at the same time he got married in the television show *The New Adventures of Lois and Clark*. Without any major event in Superman's life to write about, the writers decided to go ahead with their joke idea to kill Superman.[99] In a world that embraced antiheros and cynical worldviews in their comics, Superman did not hold the same popularity with comic book readers that he had in 1938. Readers took him for granted and shunned his unfailing wish to do good in favor of gritter, more "realistic" heroes, so DC took him away to allow readers the chance to remember why the world fell in love with Superman in the first place.[100]

The rumors that Superman was going to die sparked a media frenzy. Nearly every national newspaper and news station picked up the story, and *Superman* v.2 #75, where the titular character drew his final breath, had the largest single day sale of any comic, with the initial print run of over three million copies selling out the same day they premiered, and six million more copies being printed later in the month. Superman's death was exactly what the four series that starred Superman needed to pull their sales out of the slump in which they found themselves in 1992.[101]

The Death of Superman is often seen as one of the best marketing stunts in history, but was there some deeper meaning to the storyline? The story was published at the height of the speculator boom, and it featured multiple editions of the issues involved and included cover enhancements that enticed collectors. Passing the story off as being all flash and no substance would be easy.[102] However, Joseph Darowski argued in the essay "Searching for Meaning in

---

[99] Tye, *Superman*, 243-244.
[100] Tye, *Superman*, 246.
[101] Tye, *Superman*, 244-248.
[102] Joseph J. Darowski, "Searching for Meaning in 'The Death of Superman,'" in *Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, ed. Joseph J. Darowski (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 2012), 167-168.

'The Death of Superman'" that the events of the storyline and the characters introduced therein were a representation and a reaction to the anxieties facing Americans in a Post-Cold War world. According to Darowski, "'The Death of Superman,' and the subsequent rise of four replacement Supermen came along at a historical period when America was having its own identity crisis."[103] After the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States found itself with no major external threat to define itself against, and America's place on the world stage changed dramatically. At the same time, America was facing the dawn of the Information Age, with technology rapidly changing the way in which people worked, commuted, and communicated. Darowski argued that the four Supermen could be divided into pairs, with one pair representing America's place on the world stage, and one pair representing the dawning Information Age. One member of each pair represented the hopes and the other represented anxieties that Americans held about the aspect of the early 1990s that the pair represented.[104]

Superboy and the Eradicator represented America's undefined position in the world. Superboy stood for an age of transition and uncertainty. He was a brand-new teenage character with unimaginable levels of power but none of the experience needed to use that power wisely. The Eradicator also had none of the experience held by the original Superman but had all of his power. In always acting for the greater good, the Eradicator often used unreasonable methods to achieve his goals. As the only nation to have used the atomic bomb in a war, the United States held a lot of power and, with the Soviet Union no longer acting as a balancing force, some feared that America could use its power in dangerous ways. Steel and the Cyborg Superman therefore represent the Information Age, with Steel representing the hope that technology could be used to aid humanity, and Cyborg Superman representing the fears that technology would become

[103] Darowski, "Searching for Meaning in 'The Death of Superman,'" 171.
[104] Darowski, "Searching for Meaning in 'The Death of Superman,'" 171-172

dehumanizing and all-consuming. "The Reign of the Supermen" ended on a hopeful note with the return of the real Superman and the immigrant, small-town values his original creators instilled in him. The two Supermen that represented America's fears, Eradicator and Cyborg Superman, are destroyed, while Steel survives because of his human drive and spirit, and Superboy is allowed to mature and grow into a hero in his own right.[105] Thus, "The Death of Superman" can be read as acknowledging the challenges facing Americans in the early 1990s and reassuring Americans that those fears can be overcome through the use of the same tools that propelled the United States earlier in the century.

Prices of comic books from the Golden and Silver Ages skyrocketed in the 1980s and 1990s as one-time comic fans became nostalgic for the books they had enjoyed in their youth. When The Flash was reintroduced to comics in 1956 a question arose concerning the numbering of the new Flash's first issue. The Golden Age Flash had ended after 104 issues. Would this new Flash series start numbering at #1 or #105? A DC Comics editor at the time decided that the series would start at issue #105 because if a customer were to look at two comics, they were more likely to buy the one that had been publishing for 104 issues, not the one that was just getting started. If one were to reverse that logic, then one could begin to understand the logic behind the actions of many comic book collectors and publishers in the Dark Age. As Mark Voger explains, the prevalent theory in the Dark Age "went something like this: 'Since *Action Comics* #1 (1938) is worth tens of thousands of dollars, then I should buy lots of copies of *Pitt* #1 and wait until the year 2048, at which time I'll become a millionaire!'"[106]

The fault in this logic lay in a misunderstanding of why *Action Comics* #1 and other books from the Golden and Silver Ages were so valuable. Their value came not from the fact

[105] Darowski, "Searching for Meaning in 'The Death of Superman,'" 172-175.
[106] Voger, *The Dark Age*, 145.

they were #1 issues or the first appearances of two of the most famous comic book characters in the world, or even because they were old; rather, it was because such books were not built to last, and many had been destroyed or thrown away over the intervening fifty years. Those few that survived were rare commodities to collectors. The very act of buying multiple copies and preserving them in mint condition would drive down the price of the books investors and speculators were so desperate to sell. Publishing companies weren't afraid to take advantage of this trend, however. Start-up companies like Image Comics reaped the benefits the most as their first issues were—of course—#1s. Accordingly, more established companies had to either develop new titles, or start publishing a myriad of mini-series to create more #1 issues for the collectors to obsess over.

Speculators and collectors were undoubtedly part of the equation that resulted in the collapse of the comic book market in the mid 1990s, but the impact of the larger comic book market could not be ignored. Publishers and suppliers interpreted the increase in sales of superhero comics as an increase in demand and subsequently increased their supply to meet that demand. The success of Image Comics also led to an increase in smaller companies such as Malibu and Defiant publishing superhero books. The number of superhero comics being published skyrocketed in 1993 even as the speculators came to realize "that the rules of scarcity that legitimately raise the price of collector's items were not going to apply to comics with enormous print runs."[107] Such comics lacked the resale market that most speculators were anticipating. April of 1993 was the last month of significant growth for the speculator boom.[108] Fueled, at least in part, by the release of *Adventures of Superman* #500, this boom soon became a

[107] "Industry Sales Records in 1993 Shadowed by Collapse of Speculator Boom," *The Comics Journal* #166, February, 1994, 28.
[108] "Industry Sales Records," 32.

bust and, by 1994, the writing was on the wall for the market that had built up around the collectors. Sales numbers that had swelled with events like the *Death of Superman* and *KnightFall* tumbled in their aftermath, and the only way that *Batman* made it into the Top 100 comic books was to team up with another franchise such as The Predator or Spawn.[109]

3.3 The End of the Dark Age

Had the comic book market crashed later in the 1990s, it would have been a fitting end to the Dark Age. Despite the chaos caused by the burst of the speculator bubble, very little changed in the comic books themselves. Sales suffered, and publishers made changes to their distribution methods, but the narrative trends in the books remained the same. The changes brought to the comic book industry by Image Comics were so profound that the *Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide* considers 1992 to be the start of what they call the Copper Age, meaning that, to the *Overstreet Guide*, the Dark Age only lasted seven years. However, given the rise in the number of creator disputes with editors, the ways that Image exploited the market trends of the 1980s and 1990s, and the continuing rise of superstar creators that first started with Alan Moore and Frank Miller in 1985 and 1986, the founding Image Comics and the books it published represented a logical progression of the trends already underway in the Dark Age rather than the beginning of a new age.[110]

While the beginning of the Dark Age was readily apparent, its end came gradually as the dominant mode of storytelling began to change. In response to the dominance of purposeless, gratuitous violence in comics, some creators sought to rebel against revisionism by returning to the joy and wonder that was once prevalent in comics. “This counter-reformation coalesced […]

---

[109] Weldon, *The Caped Crusade*, 194.
[110] Robert M. Overstreet, ed., *The Overstreet Comics Book Price Guide* 48th ed. (Hunt Valley, Maryland: Gemstone Publishing, 2018), 212.

into a movement of its own" through the publication of works like *Marvels* and *Astro City*, both by Kurt Busiek.[111] This movement, called reconstructionism, abandoned the realistic quality of revisionism while preserving its literary intelligence.[112] Naturally, there were those who resisted the turn towards reconstructionism, including the writer Warren Ellis. Ellis spent much of the 1990s ignoring the existence of reconstructionism in favor of preserving realism in his work. As reconstructionism became the dominant mode of storytelling, however, Ellis's work began to look outdated and angry in comparison.[113] Revisionist comics, as a general rule, utilized violence for the sake of being violent and, with the turn towards reconstructionism, the use of violence with no larger purpose in the narrative seemed to be a childish throwback to the comics of the 1980s.

Published by Marvel Comics in 1994, *Marvels* examined the early years of Marvel Comics through the eyes of a fictional journalist, Phil Sheldon. The story proceeded chronologically through the Golden Age, Silver Age, and early Bronze Age of Marvel Comics, from 1939 to 1974 with Phil Sheldon bearing witness to the biggest events of those years, including the arrival of Galactus (seen in *Fantastic Four* v.1 #48-50 from 1966) and the death of Gwen Stacy (originally seen in *The Amazing Spider-Man* v.1 #121-122).[114] Though it represented a marked departure from the underlying themes of other Dark Age stories, *Marvels* was a massive success and spawned a number of sequels and spin-offs, none of which were nearly as successful as the original series. One spin-off from *Marvels* merits special attention. *Ruins* was the complete opposite of *Marvels* in every way. In *Ruins*, Bruce Banner was turned into a living mass of cancerous tumors after being exposed to radiation from a gamma bomb

[111] Thurman and Darius, *Voyage in Noise*, 36, Kindle.
[112] Thurman and Darius, *Voyage in Noise*, 36, Kindle.
[113] Thurman and Darius, *Voyage in Noise*, 37.
[114] Kurt Busiek (w), Alex Ross (a), *Marvels* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2009).

rather than becoming the Incredible Hulk,[115] and Peter Parker contracted a mutant radioactive virus instead of gaining spider powers.[116]

Ruins was realism taken to the extreme as each of Marvel's most loved and most famous characters met a variety of gruesome fates. Instead of documenting the wonders and marvels presented by the superheroes, Sheldon spent the last years of his life travelling the United States looking for the catalyst for the horrors he saw. *Marvels* reveled in the possibilities presented by men and women who could fly, but *Ruins* not only pointed out every logical flaw in the superhero genre, but also concisely demonstrated how easily the reconstructionist narratives could be dismantled with the application of a little real-world politics and physics. The popularity of *Marvels* was originally thought to be a fad, but by 1997 reconstructionism dominated the industry, and *Ruins* "looked like an odd throwback to the revisionism of the 1980s – one that failed to understand that *Marvels* had been a portent of things to come.[117]

Though *Marvels* was written too early to represent the end of the Dark Age, it did signal the beginning of the end. The story featured a reversal of a number of themes that were common in Dark Age comics while eschewing the dominant mode of storytelling. For instance, *Marvels* was decidedly realistic both in terms of the style of artwork and the content of the story, but that realism was used to celebrate the possibilities posed by superheroes rather than impose restrictions on their powers or expound on their various psychosis. DC's *Kingdom Come* expounded further on the themes featured in *Marvels*. Like *Marvels*, *Kingdom Come* followed a civilian in his interactions with superheroes and villains in an attempt to demonstrate the wonder and joy that revisionist comics neglected. Written by Mark Waid and drawn by Alex Ross,

---

[115] Warren Ellis (w), Cliff Nielsen and Terese Nielsen (p,i), "[Untitled]" *Ruins* #1 (August, 1995), Marvel Comics.
[116] Warren Ellis (w), Cliff Nielsen and Terese Nielsen (p,i), "[Untitled]" *Ruins* #2 (September, 1995), Marvel Comics.
[117] Thurman and Darius, *Voyage in Noise*, 37.

Kingdom Come represented pushback against the cynical, nihilistic messages found in comics published in the late 1980s and 1990s.[118] *Kingdom Come* was never meant to fall into the trends of realism and revisionism that dominated the Dark Age and instead sought to act as a commentary on the cynical, overly violent tones that superhero comics took in the 1980s and 1990s. Though few changes were seen in the types of stories told in 1996 and 1997, *Kingdom Come*, like *Marvels* before it, acted as heralds of the end of the Dark Age and the end of the dominant storytelling trends of realism and revisionism.

Despite the changes in narrative and artistic forms introduced by reconstructionist comics, there were no widespread changes in most mainstream comic books until 2001. In 2000, Marvel Comics launched a widescale re-imagining of their fictional universe with *Ultimate Spider-Man*. While DC started the Dark Age by undertaking such a re-imagining in Crisis on Infinite Earths, Marvel avoided any large-scale changes to their continuity and characters, save for a failed attempt in the *Heroes Reborn* series in 1996. The Ultimate Universe, as Marvel called this re-imagining, featured modernized versions of Marvel's most popular heroes. One of the main problems with the comics of the Dark Age had been the overwhelming amount of continuity into which modern comics were required to fit. Because comics were written to appeal to already existing fans, it was nearly impossible for new readers to get a foothold in the long-running series. The Ultimate Universe sought to rectify that issue by reintroducing the characters as young heroes that were just beginning their careers.[119]

The stories published under the Ultimate Universe were independent from the main series, so *Ultimate Spider-Man* could tell the story of the hero's earliest days divorced from the

---

[118] Mark Waid (w), Alex Ross (a), *Kingdom Come* (New York: DC Comics, 1997).
[119] Abraham Riesman, "The Secret History of Ultimate Marvel, the Experiment That Changed Superheroes Forever," *Vulture*, last modified May 25, 2015, accessed March 11, 2020, www.vulture.com/2015/05/secret-history-of-ultimate-marvel.html.

main universe's continuity while the main *Spider-Man* series continued to tell stories deeply rooted in the forty years of continuity that already existed. Marvel hoped that fans of *Ultimate Spider-Man* would eventually also start reading the main *Spider-Man* series. Though the reintroduction of characters was nothing new, the Ultimate Universe helped bring Marvel out of the sales slump and Chapter 11 bankruptcy they suffered during the 1990s. *Ultimate X-Men* appeared in 2001 when the imprint proved to be a success and was the first major hit of the reboot. Other series followed, including Ultimate versions of the Fantastic Four and the Avengers and, by the middle of the decade, the Ultimate Universe regularly dominated the sales charts and had single handedly saved Marvel Comics.[120]

The Dark Age was a time when comics sold in higher numbers than ever before and the art form became more respected than it ever had thanks to complex and compelling stories. However, those benefits came at a cost as the collapse of the speculator market nearly destroyed the entire industry, and more emphasis was often placed on sales gimmicks than creating valuable stories. As a continuation of the evolution of the comic book, the Dark Age was necessary, but there have been too many changes in the industry and the art form since 1985 to realistically argue that the Dark Age has continued into modern day.

The Dark Age came to an end in 2001 not only because of the beginning of Marvel's revitalization efforts, but also because of a fundamental shift in the narrative contents of mainstream comics following the September 11th attacks. Additionally, the success of comic book stories outside of the realm of comic books, in the form of movies and television shows, in the twenty-first century demonstrated a marked departure from the lackluster movies and campy television shows that defined comic book adaptations in the second half of the twentieth century.

---

[120] Riesman, "The Secret History of Ultimate Marvel."

The Dark Age was necessary, but its time passed long ago, and putting present day comics in the same grouping as comics from 1986 does a disservice not only to modern day comics, but also to Dark Age comics. A new age began in 2001: the Aluminum Age.

4 "THE SENSE OF ESCAPISM COMIC BOOKS HAVE PROVIDED NO LONGER EXISTS; THE FANTASY WORLD MUST GIVE WAY TO THE REAL ONE": THE ALUMINUM AGE (2001-PRESENT)

Today, the Dark Age remains one of the most well-known ages in the comic book classification system. Comics published in the Aluminum Age were more diverse than their Dark Age counterparts, and the reactions of comic writers and artists to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 caused several changes in the narrative conventions of the industry. When coupled with the rise of the comic book film industry and the creation of Marvel's Ultimate Universe, these changes demonstrated a fundamental shift in the comic books that warrants the creation of a new age, which I have conceived. Today's comic book age, which began emerging in 2001, should be known as the Aluminum Age.

The changes to the comic book medium and industry described in this chapter demonstrate the differences between comics published in the Dark Age and comics published in the Aluminum Age. As is the case with other ages in the classification system, these differences warrant the creation of an addition to the larger system. The Aluminum Age began in 2001 when changes to the comic book medium and industry took hold. Including Aluminum Age books in the Dark Age—as the current classification system claims—does a disservice to both ages.

4.1 Gender Diversity

One of the hallmarks of the Aluminum Age is greater diversity in comic books. The introduction of minority characters in comics was an ongoing process since the 1970s. The

advances in diversity that came in the Bronze and Dark Ages focused mainly on racial minorities, while the Aluminum Age introduced more queer characters in comics from mainstream publishers. Marvel Comics' Northstar made history in the Dark Age when he came out as the first openly gay superhero in mainstream superhero comics in 1992. He dd not, however, have any sort of visible romantic relationship until 2008, and other gay superheroes failed to manifest in any meaningful way in the main publications from both DC and Marvel. Marvel Comics in particular struggled to include queer representation in its comics and would not see an on-panel same-sex kiss until 2009 when two minor X-Men, Julio Richter and Shatterstar, were revealed to be in a same sex relationship.[121]

Originally introduced in the Silver Age as a love interest for Batman, Batwoman in the Aluminum Age was no longer interested in Batman romantically. Instead, she was a lesbian.[122] Batwoman has generally been considered good representation for the lesbian community, but DC Comics shied away from putting her in any long-lasting romantic relationship. The authors of the *Batwoman* comic series left the series in 2009 when DC refused to allow Batwoman to get married despite the fact that proposed to her long term girlfriend.[123] The largest names in the comic book industry were happy to pay lip service to the queer community for much of the early 2000s by including characters that were nominally queer but never engaged in queer activities and were never allowed to have long term romantic relationships for fear of angering certain readers. For better representations of queer characters, one has to turn to a somewhat unexpected source.

---

[121] Peter David (w), Valentine De Landro (p), Marco Santucci (p,i), and Pat Davidson et al. (i), "[Untitled]," *X-Factor* v.3 #45 (August, 2009), Marvel Comics.
[122] Geoff Johns, Grant Morrison, Greg Ruka, et. al. (w), Keith Griffin and Ken Lashley (p), Marvin Mariano and Greg Parkin (i), "Going Down," *52* #7 (August, 2006), DC Comics.
[123] Cavan Sieczkowski, "'Batwoman' Authors Exit, Claim DC Comics Banned Gay Marriage Storyline," Huffington Post, last modified September 5, 2013, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/batwoman-dc-comics-gay-marriage_n_3873508

Created by Warren Ellis in 1999, *The Authority* was, at first glance a Dark Age series that largely conformed to the tropes, conventions, and clichés of the age. This series was unusual, however, in that it was, among the first comics that came close to being considered "mainstream" with a long-term homosexual relationship prominently featured. Midnighter and Apollo from *The Authority* were unique among the few gay characters present in mainstream comics in the Dark Age as they were allowed to be openly intimate with each other, even going as far as getting married and adopting a child together on panel. Some fans would argue that Northstar's wedding to his boyfriend, Kyle, in *Astonishing X-Men* v.3 #51, from 2012, constituted the first gay wedding in mainstream comics, but Midnighter and Apollo were married ten years earlier in *The Authority* #29 from 2002, and that comic provided much better representation for LGBTQ+ individuals. Apollo and Midnighter remained prominent in Wildstorm's comics following their wedding, while the same could not be said for Northstar and Kyle in Marvel's comics. Compared to other queer characters available in comics at the time, Apollo and Midnighter were revolutionary in terms of both their on-panel intimacy and the fact that they both remained traditionally masculine whilst in their relationship, something that could not be said for other gay characters in mainstream comics at the time.[124] Though queer characters have been slow to be introduced to mainstream comics due to both prejudice and the restrictions of the CCA, the industry at large became more accepting of queer identities in the Aluminum Age as exemplified by both the mainstream backing of *Love is Love* and the recent surge in the inclusion of queer characters.

[124] Rob Lendrum, "Queering Super-Manhood: Superhero Masculinity, Camp and Public Relations as a Textual Framework," *International Journal of Comic Art* 7, no.1 (Spring/Summer 2005): 291-293.

4.2 September 11, 2001 and the De-escalation of Violence

Popular media underwent a fundamental shift following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. As the inevitable comparisons to the attack on Pearl Harbor began, it would be natural to assume that producers of popular media would rush to defend America's shared national values, but the comic book industry world changed between 1941 and 2001. Comics, once the perfect tool for the dissemination of propaganda, were now the domain of a cynical, nihilistic, morally relativistic subculture. As historian Bradford Wright wrote, "September 11th forced comic book markers to step back and reevaluate the place of their industry in American culture. Some found it difficult for a time to find anything relevant to say with super-powered heroes in tights. Others called for a new moral direction in comic books."[125] Artist Jim Steranko in particular called for an end to the cynicism and nihilism that overtook the comics industry in the 1980s and 1990s in a press release put our two weeks after the attacks.[126]

In December 2001, the attacks appeared in the storylines of mainstream, ongoing comics. *Amazing Spider-Man* v.2 #36 was the first mainstream comic to address the attacks. It emphasized unity and hope in the face of tragedy while making it clear that even if superheroes were unable to stop terrorist attacks, they would be there to help however they could. The narration called upon the reader to "draft a covenant with your conscience, that we will create a world in which such things need not occur. A world which will not require apologies to children, but also a world whose roads are not paved with the husks of their inalienable rights."[127] The goal of the Spider-Man story was to present a hopeful message of recovery and honor those who

[125] Wright, *Comic Book Nation,* 287-288.
[126] Wright, *Comic Book Nation,* 288.
[127] J. Michael Straczyski (w), John Romita Jr. (p), and Scott Hana (i), "Stand Tall," *Amazing Spider-Man* v.2 #36 (December, 2001), Marvel Comics.

died in the attacks. Ultimately, the so-called "Black Issue" of *Amazing Spider-Man* was a touching tribute to those who died in the attacks, but it was distinctively hands-off, with no political message outside of patriotism. It was meant to address the tragedy without ever commenting upon it.

Costumed superheroes were not the best icons to stand in immediate aftermath of the attacks. Robert Wilonsky, a writer for *SF Weekly* noted in October 2001 that:

> In a post-Sept. 11 world, even the phrase "Look, up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane!" sounds different; its awe has been replaced by shock and revulsion. The sense of escapism [that] comic books have provided no longer exists; the fantasy world must give way to the real one.[128]

Comics never shied away from commenting on real world events. Still, comics published in the wake of 9/11 seemed to show traditional, mainstream superhero comics confronting a real-world event more explicitly than before. Superhero comics published during the 1940s addressed World War II but, in order to maintain suspension of disbelief, they rarely addressed particular wartime events. In contrast, some comics published after 9/11 not only depicted superheroes as helping with clean-up efforts, but some also addressed the underlying political and social atmosphere surrounding the attacks. The first story in *Captain America* volume 4, which began publication in April 2002, was rewritten following 9/11 in order to allow the writer to properly address the attacks. The story deals with Captain America hunting down a fictional terrorist named Faysal Al-Tariq who organized a terrorist attack on a small town seven months after the September 11th attacks because of American military actions in the Middle East.[129]

---

[128] Robert Wilonsky, "The Brave and the Bold - October 3, 2001," *SF* Weekly, last modified October 3, 2001, accessed October 21, 2019, www.sfweekly.com/culture/the-brave-and-the-bold/.
[129] John Ney Rieber (w), John Cassaday (p, i), *Captain America: The New Deal,* ed. Stuart Moore and Joe Quesada (New York: Marvel Comics, 2018).

The covers of the first six issues of *Captain America* v. 4 were suitably patriotic, but the tone of the comics themselves was not nationalistic. Rather than indiscriminately proclaiming that America had done no wrong, *Captain America* v.4 addressed the underlying political and social issues that motivated the terrorists, which meant that occasionally the terrorists were shown in a somewhat sympathetic light. Though Al-Tariq was undeniably the villain of the story, his motivations served to highlight some of the complexity surrounding the September 11th attacks and the subsequent War on Terror. John Cassaday, artist of *Captain America* v. 4, claimed that "Captain America is a creature born of propaganda. He's the perfect venue for what's going on right now."[130] Aside from some expected patriotic sentimentality, the first six issues of *Captain America* v.4 were not overly propagandistic. Captain America not only admitted to some of the more atrocious actions of the US Government, but also argued against the rampant xenophobia and antagonism that could be found in other forms of media. Thus, Captain America v. 4 featured "a new version of Captain America that was markedly different from the patriotic jingoism of the early wartime Cap [….] the archetypal superhero sees shades of grey where he once saw black and white."[131]

At the same time that comics were intersecting with violent real-world events, the gratuitous violence that characterized the Dark Age saw a marked decline. John Cassaday observed that in the wake of the attacks, "comics about mass devastation [were] quickly being regarded as dinosaurs. Inappropriate dinosaurs."[132] One only has to look at how the destruction of the World Trade Center was depicted in 1991's *X-Force* v.1 #3 and *Spider-Man* v.1 #16 to understand the difference between the use of violence in Aluminum Age comics and Dark Age

[130] Wright, *Comic Book Nation,* 290.
[131] Geoff Martin and Erin Steuter, *Pop Culture Goes to War: Enlisting and Resisting Militarism in the War on Terror* (Plymouth, United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2010), 207.
[132] Wright, *Comic Book Nation,* 288

comics. In these issues, the destruction of the top half of the South Tower of the World Trade Center is met with little concern from the superheroes.[133] Granted, these issues came out before either of the attacks on the World Trade Center, but the lack of concern paid by the superheroes to the devastation around them was indicative of the Dark Age. By contrast, the two-page spread of destruction in *Amazing Spider-Man* v.2 #36, by contrast, demonstrated the Aluminum Age's attitude toward gratuitous violence. In the first story, Spider-Man barely acknowledges the destruction with a humorous "uh-oh," while in the 9/11 commemorative issue, Spider-Man is rendered nearly speechless at the destruction. According to media researcher, Liam Burke, "the most immediate impact of 9/11 on comics was the necessary reworking of the comic book trope of 'ever escalating stakes.'"[134] Violence was still present in superhero comics, but the consequences of large-scale destruction in metropolitan areas were no longer brushed to the side. Instead, the consequences of mass violence were occasionally vividly displayed.

Written in 2008, Marvel's *Civil War* was one of Marvel's most ambitious storylines to be published following 9/11. In the story, a group of inexperienced heroes known as the New Warriors causes an explosion in Stamford, Connecticut that kills over 600 people. Following this, the US Government passes the Superhero Registration Act, which requires super-powered individuals to register their secret identities with the government. The conflict over whether or not to comply with the act eventually tears apart the superhero community.[135] *Civil War* was a metaphor for divisiveness among many Americans after the September 11th Attacks, with Iron Man and his allies representing the call for greater government oversight and protection, while

---

[133] Fabian Nicieza (w), and Rob Liefeld (w, p, i), "Battle Cry (Prelude to Sabotage)," *X-Force* v.1 #3 (October 1991), Marvel Comics.; Todd McFarlane (w, p, i), "Sabotage, Part 1," *Spider-Man* v.1 #16 (November, 1991), Marvel Comics.
[134] Liam Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation* (Jackson, Mississippi: The University Press of Mississippi, 2015), chap. 1, Kindle.
[135] Mark Millar (w), Steve McNiven (p), Dexter Vines et. al. (i), *Civil War* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2007).

Captain America and his allies fighting against increasing governmental authoritarianism. According to Scott A. Cord, "The Registration Act mirrors the Patriot Act, which passed with almost no opposition and virtually no debate, although it gave law enforcement unprecedented powers to spy on all citizens."[136] Thus, the fictional conflict over the registration of superheroes mirrored the real life conflict taking place during the War on Terror over whether global security required the sacrifice of one's civil liberties.

Almost immediately after the end of *Civil War*, Marvel Comics began publishing *Secret Invasion*. The main plot of *Secret Invasion* involved a race of aliens known as the Skrulls, who invaded earth by disguising themselves as heroes they had kidnapped, including Spider-Woman, Elektra, Black Bolt, and Captain Marvel.[137] The overarching theme of this event—the insecurity of being unable to trust friends and neighbors—paralleled the aura of suspicion and fear that gripped the U.S. following 9/11. *Secret Invasion* fell securely within the science fiction subgenre of the invasion narrative. These types of stories flourished in pulp fiction between the two World Wars and made their way into cinema in the 1950s. Following the September 11th Attacks, the invasion narrative was once again dominant in American cinema.

Secret Invasion was unusual among alien invasion narratives, since the invasion of earth undertaken by the Skrulls was specifically religiously motivated. A religious prophecy from the Skrull home world prompted the invasion, and the Skrulls' religion is consistently shown as different from those of the West and as a direct threat to America. The religion of the Skrulls could be read as addressing the failings of politicized religion in general. Explicit references to "Jihad" in the text made it clear that the fundamentalism being criticized by *Secret Invasion* was

---

[136] Cord A. Scott, "Comics and Conflict: War and Patriotically Themed Comics in American Cultural History from World War II Through the Iraq War" (PhD. diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2011), 255.
[137] Brian Michael Bendis (w), Leinil Yu (p), and Mark Morales (i), *Secret Invasion*, ed. Tom Brevoort (New York: Marvel Comics, 2008).

specifically Islamic fundamentalism.[138] For much of their history, the heroes of the Marvel Universe were defenders of the liberal position as they focused on issues of social justice and were open to new ideas. The stories published throughout George W. Bush's presidency questioned how those ideals would react when the U.S. was directly attacked, and the narrative arc that stretched from *Civil War*, in 2005, to *Siege*, in 2010, reaffirmed the heroes' liberal positions. *Secret Invasion*, however, was a departure from that consensus, since the heroes slid into paranoia and xenophobia that was more in the spirt of wartime comics than comics from the Aluminum Age.[139] *Secret Invasion* was steeped in post-9/11 imagery and attitudes toward those labeled "other" as previously trusted heroes were labeled complacent in a plot to conquer the earth, and the paranoia and xenophobia demonstrated by the heroes was all too common in the American public following 9/11.

4.3 Comics as Transmedial Objects

Adapting mass media from one form to another is nothing new in the world of entertainment, and comic books were well suited to being adapted into other forms. Superman first appeared in 1938 and, by 1939, his stories were already being adapted as syndicated comic strips in daily syndication in newspapers across the country. This strip would continue to appear in newspapers until 1966, despite the decline in popularity of the superhero genre following World War II. By 1950, just 12 years after he first debuted, Superman had appeared in a nationally broadcast radio serial (1940-1951), a novel called *The Adventures of Superman* by George Lowell (1942), a series of Max Fleischer cartoons (1941-1942), and two film serials for Columbia Pictures (one in 1948 and one in 1950). Superman may not have been the first

[138] Dyfrig Jones, "Islamic Invaders: *Secret Invasion* and the Post-9/11 World of Marvel," (unpublished manuscript, Bangor University, 2019) 11-12.
[139] Jones, "Islamic Invaders," 15.

superhero to make the jump from comic book pages to the big screen, but he was responsible for demonstrating just how easily comic book characters could be licensed.[140] The pictorial nature of comic books makes the characters within them easy to copyright, which made them appealing to both licensors and corporations. The characters in a comic book are not as abstract as characters in a novel, making copyright infringement lawsuits much easier to defend.[141]

While adaptations of comic books in other forms of media were relatively common in the second half of the twentieth century, the number of adaptations increased dramatically during the Aluminum Age. Starting with the release of *X-Men* in 2001, the comic book film went from an unimpressive, risky investment to an almost guaranteed blockbuster. The reasons behind the shift from B-movie to blockbuster run the gamut from improved CGI technology to a cultural need for simple tales of good overcoming evil in the wake of 9/11.[142] Wider trends in the film industry played a role in the rise of the comic book film as international audiences for American-made films grew, and Hollywood producers began searching for pre-branded franchises that would have a guaranteed audience before the film was even made. Due to this desire for characters that audiences were already familiar with, superhero comics represented an opportunity to salvage the struggling comic book industry by orienting it around its intellectual properties rather than physical goods. According to researcher Shawna Kidman, "the immaterial possession of intangible characters and stories had become the business's most valuable currency."[143] Liam Burke and Shawna Kidman attribute some of the popularity of the superhero movie to the cultural trauma surrounding the September 11th attacks, but the movies that sparked the boom in

---

[140] Tye, *Superman,* 107.; Kidman, *Incorporating Comics*, 27.
[141] Kidman, *Incorporating Comics*, 21.
[142] According to Liam Burke, innovation in the realm of digital technologies is the most often cited catalyst for the recent boom in comic book adaptations. Some critics argue that better CGI technology attracts larger audiences. Other claim that comic book adaptations have been waiting for digital technology advance to the point that the action sequences and superpowers in comics could be convincingly shown.
[143] Kidman, *Incorporating Comics*, 181-188.

comic book adaptations, *X-Men* and Sam Rami's *Spider-Man*, were far into production or even released by the time of the attacks. Some films, such as *V for Vendetta* were a clear reaction to the events of September 11, 2001, but Kidman and Burke assert that the comic book film in often offered moral clarity that was missing in the polarized post-9/11 atmosphere.[144]

Regardless of why comic book adaptations became popular in the Aluminum Age, the impact such popularity had on the comic book industry as a whole was profound. Thanks to those adaptations, there are two sides to the modern comic books industry: the popular and the esoteric. One side, the popular, is designed to appeal to the public at large. It is in this form that the comic book industry has remained a product of the mass media industry. The esoteric side appeals only to "a tiny niche audience, a demographic so narrow that the health of comic book publishing has been under sustained and significant threat."[145] This duality created a number of problems for the creative and editorial teams behind modern comic books. These teams must create content that will retain an extremely finicky, narrow, and notoriously hard to please fan base while simultaneously appealing to the mainstream public.[146] The ease with which comic book stories and characters can be adapted to fit other forms of media secured the status of comic books as transmedial objects while also providing a much needed source of income when the sales of comic books themselves were not enough to keep the industry alive. Only twenty live-action films based off comics came out between 1950 and 1990, and none of these movies were particularly successful at the box office.[147] By contrast, between 2000 and 2010 there were fifty-two such films released, and a vast majority of them attained blockbuster status.[148] The money

[144] Kidman, *Incorporating Comics*, 187.
[145] Kidman, *Incorporating Comics*, 2.
[146] Kidman, *Incorporating Comics*, 3.
[147] Kidman, *Incorporating Comics*, 183.
[148] Kidman, *Incorporating Comics*, Appendix A.

generated by this new generation of comic book films not only created incentive to write stories that lent themselves well to big-screen adaptations, but also directed more mainstream attention at the infamously insular industry. Comics may have been transmedial objects since their popularity first began in the 1930s, but it was only in the Aluminum Age that Hollywood and the comic book industry both realized the potential they held for blockbuster movies.

4.4 Prequels, Sequels, and Tie-Ins: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

4.4.1 Doomsday Clock

The emphasis on profit over quality that became so prevalent in the Dark Age continued into the Aluminum Age as companies began capitalizing more blatantly on the nostalgia of long-term fans and the iconic nature of a number of the series from the 1980s and 1990s. Perhaps the most obvious and recent example of recycling plotlines and themes in comics is DC Comics' current 12-issue series, *Doomsday Clock*, a continuation of Alan Moore's wildly popular *Watchmen.* DC, attempting to capitalize on the success that *Watchmen* brought them over the years, brought characters created for a single series into their main universe in an attempt to recycle the characters in a new setting. DC also relied on the iconic status of the original work to bring in customers. Issues of *Doomsday Clock* followed *Watchmen*'s well known 9-panel grid layout and were printed on lower quality paper than other current comics to more closely mimic the feel of the original issues of *Watchmen*.[149]

Recycling involves making something new out of something old, so while DC Comics increased profits by republishing *Watchmen* in various collected editions, *Doomsday Clock* better represents the recycling of popular culture. *Doomsday Clock* is not the first series that DC published in an attempt to capitalize on *Watchmen*'s iconic status. *Before Watchmen* was a series

[149] Geoff Johns (w), Gary Frank (p, i). *Doomsday Clock* v.1 #1-12, (November 2017-December 2019), DC Comics.

of comics published in 2012 that acted as a prequel to Alan Moore's work. Each collection of comics focused on a single character from the original series and gave each of those characters more complete backstories.[150] Ultimately, both *Before Watchmen* and *Doomsday Clock* would not have been out of place had they been published in the Dark Age. Both clearly attempted to capitalize on the success of *Watchmen*, like so many of the books published during the Dark Age, but both also failed to achieve the same notoriety due, at least in part, to a fundamental misunderstanding about the initial message of *Watchmen.* Initially, *Watchmen* deconstructed the idea of a superhero and posited the theory that if superheroes were real, they would be fascists at worst or massively disappointing at best. *Doomsday Clock*'s attempt to combine the world of *Watchmen* with the core superheroes of DC Comics made for a fun crossover but ultimately fell flat because DC's insistence that superheroes are a force for good and are able to be trusted with the fate of the world is incompatible with the cynical and fatalistic view of super-heroism that *Watchmen* employed.

4.4.2 Secret Wars

Sometimes the recycling done by the popular culture industry is overt, but other instances of recycling in the Aluminum Age are more subtle. Marvel Comics in particular has done less obvious recycling than DC Comics, but in 2015 they published a fourth series by the name *Secret Wars.* The original *Secret Wars* helped spark the Dark Age with its status as one of the first event comics, and Marvel quickly followed up on their success with *Secret Wars II* in the same year. (The sequel did not attract as much acclaim as the original and has since faded into obscurity.)The third story to bear the title *Secret Wars* appeared in 1988 and consisted of only

[150] Darwyn Cooke, Brian Azzarello, et al. (w), Amanda Conner, J.G. Jones, et al. (p,i), *Before Watchmen* (2012), DC Comics.

two issues of the *Fantastic Four* series.[151] This short installment is also largely forgotten and ignored by fans.

Rather than being a marketing scheme for a line of action figures, as the original *Secret Wars* was, 2015's *Secret Wars* was better planned and arguably more fulfilling than the original.[152] The most recent *Secret Wars* differs greatly from the original, but the inclusion of a place called Battleworld and the use of the same title dispels any doubt that Marvel was attempting to capitalize on the sparse similarities between the two and evoke nostalgia within older members of its fan base to increase sales. Additionally, a parody tie-in mini-series to 2015's *Secret Wars* called *Deadpool's Secret Secret Wars* revealed that the infamous mercenary, Deadpool, took part in the original *Secret Wars*.[153] It is important to know here that Deadpool did not appear in comics until *The New Mutants* v.1 #98, which was released in 1991, nearly seven years after the publication of the original *Secret Wars*.[154] The retroactive inclusion of Deadpool in 1984's *Secret Wars* not only invoked a sense of nostalgia for the original series while actively tying the old series to the new one. There would be very little to link 2015's *Secret Wars* with the series from 1984 aside from the basic premise and title if it weren't for the inclusion of *Deadpool's Secret Secret Wars*, which is currently regarded by both fans and the industry as a tie-in story to both 1984 and 2015's *Secret Wars*. Despite having very little to do with the original Secret Wars, the 2015 series used the same title as the 1984 series to entice fans. The repeated use of the title "*Secret Wars*" created certain expectations in long term fans and, though the 2015 series had very little connection to the 1984 series, long term fans were more likely to

---

[151] Found in Fantastic Four v.1 #318-319.
[152] Jim Shooter, "Secrets of the Secret Wars," JimShooter.com - Writer. Creator. Large Mammal., last modified 4 Apr. 2011, accessed April 11, 2019, jimshooter.com/2011/04/secrets-of-secret-wars.html/.
[153] Cullen Bunn (w), Matteo Lolli, and Matteo Buffagni (p, i), *Deadpool's Secret Secret Wars* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2015).
[154] Rob Liefeld, Fabian Nicieza (w), Rob Liefeld (p, i), "The Beginning of the End Part 1," *The New Mutants* v.1 #98 (February 1991), Marvel Comics.

be interested in the story if they thought it would be connected in some way to the 1984 series. Thus, comic producers could create an audience for the series without providing any information about it.

4.4.3 Infinite Crisis

Published in 2006, *Infinite Crisis* was the sequel to *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and recreated the multiverse that had been destroyed in *CoIE*. In recreating that multiverse, *Infinite Crisis* also reintroduced the Golden Age version of Superman to the main DC Universe. The Golden Age Superman comes to believe that the modern world in which he finds himself (i.e. the current incarnation of the main DC Universe) is irredeemably flawed and must be replaced with the universe he remembers. In the course of this decision, the Golden Age Superman questioned the choices made by Americans since 1986 and lamented the existence of more realistic, grittier heroes that have risen since the publication of *CoIE* while embracing the values of older comic books.[155] In the opening pages of Infinite Crisis, DC's core trinity of heroes have drifted from what they originally were. Batman was turned overly dark and cynical following the trials of the Dark Age. Wonder Woman became violent and warlike, and Superman was ineffectual and uninspiring. By reintroducing the Golden Age incarnation of Superman, *Infinite Crisis* was able to call into question the qualities that made a hero and examine the ways that those qualities have changed since Superman's introduction in 1938.[156]

Part of the reason why Superman was able to endure as a character for over 80 years was the fact that he changed to fit the zeitgeist. The Golden Age Superman in *Infinite Crisis* was unable to adapt to the modern world and thus attempted to make the modern world adapt to him.

---

[155] Geoff Johns (w), Phil Jimenez et. al. (p), Andy Lanning, et. al. (i), *Infinite Crisis* (New York: DC Comics, 2007).
[156] Johnson, "This Isn't Your Grandfather's Comic Book Universe," 201.

At the same time, the modern Superman was unable to adapt to the needs and wants of a Post-9/11 society and had thus been unable to inspire anyone in the DC Universe since he died in 1992. Following his death and resurrection, the storylines in books starring Superman had been strained as he married Lois Lane, revealed his secret identity to her, became a blue energy-based hero and split into two different versions of himself, before finally returning to normal. None of those gimmicks caught the public's attention the way his death had. Following the September 11th Attacks, it seemed like the modern Superman was in danger of becoming as outdated as his Golden Age counterpart.[157] *Infinite Crisis*'s role as a sequel to *CoIE* is less important than its commentary on the state of contemporary comics. The overly violent, gritty heroes of the Dark Age came under attack from both the past and present as the Golden Age Superman saw them as being unworthy of the mantle he created, and modern heroes were unable to move on from the tragedies they experienced in the Dark Age. Infinite Crisis acts as a template for Aluminum Age comics: Its heroes make the decision to move on from their darkest moments while still allowing the past to affect them, without causing them to stand still.

4.4.4 Dark Nights: Metal

Some of DC's recent mainstream series would qualify as part of the Dark Age had they been published 20 years ago, such as *Dark Nights: Metal* which featured a dark, twisted version of the DC multiverse living on the underside of the main multiverse—that is, the collection of universes in which DC Comics' stories take place. Unlike other Dark Age books, this series did not embrace a fatalistic view of super-heroism that characterized so many Dark Age books and ended on an optimistic note for the future rather than a pessimistic view of humanity and super-heroism. *Dark Nights: Metal* found a balance between the hopeful nature of the DC universe and

[157] Johnson, "This Isn't Your Grandfather's Comic Book Universe," 204-207.

the cynicism and nihilism espoused by books like *Watchmen*. The DC Multiverse is made up of every possible permutation of the DC heroes, while the Dark Multiverse was brought into being by the fears of those living in the main Multiverse.[158] Had this series been published in the Dark Age, these fears may have succeeded in overtaking a number of characters, but the days of revisionism were behind comics at this point, and reconstructionism dictated that the inherent strength of superheroes would be more than enough to overcome the fear and cynicism caused by the Dark Multiverse.

Perhaps more important than the themes presented in the main *Dark Nights: Metal* series was DC Comics' use of the Dark Multiverse as an opportunity to revisit previously published events. This *Tales of the Dark Multiverse* series is made up of single issues, each looking at a different earth of the Dark Multiverse where one of DC's most famous events occurred slightly differently than was previously shown. For example, *Tales of the Dark Multiverse: Knightfall* took place in a world where Bruce Wayne was unable to defeat Jean-Paul Valley to take back the mantle of Batman, and Valley was able to take over Gotham City as "Saint Batman" to rule it with an iron fist.[159] In *Tales of the Dark Multiverse: The Death of Superman*, Lois Lane came to resent the fact that rest of the superhero community left Superman to die alone and took the power of Superman from the Eradicator. Lois fought both Superboy and the Cyborg Superman before the original Superman made what was to be his triumphant return only to be immediately killed again.[160]

---

[158] Scott Snyder (w), Greg Capullo (p), Jonathan Glapion (i), "[Untitled]," *Dark Nights: Metal* v.1 #4 (February 2018), DC Comics.
[159] Scott Snyder and Kyle Higgins (w), Javier Fernandez (a), "Tales from the Dark Multiverse: Batman: Knightfall," *Tales from the Dark Multiverse: Batman: Knightfall* #1 (December, 2019), DC Comics.
[160] Jeff Loveness (w), Brad Walker (p), Andrew Hennessy and Norm Rapmund (i), "The Death of Superman," *Tales of the Dark Multiverse: The Death of Superman* #1 (December, 2019), DC Comics.

All of the *Tales from the Dark Multiverse* one-shot stories were careful to keep the tone of the original event while altering the content of the story to investigate other ways the event could have gone. These one-shots thus identify contact points within comics that could have made the series change dramatically if certain events had happened slightly differently. These stories are some of the best examples of recycling plots in the Aluminum Age. First, the tone and title of the work invoke a sense of nostalgia on the part of the consumer. Also, DC released $1 editions of the most famous comics in the relevant event. The publication of these new editions of iconic comics allowed DC to make more money off of the nostalgia the story invoked. *Dark Nights: Metal*, and its subsequent tie-in issues represented a unique aspect of the Aluminum Age where elements of past events are revisited or retooled to fit a new theme as needed.

4.4.5 Other Notable Texts

Some of the most obvious examples of recycling previous plots and gimmicks came from single issues. In 2008 DC Comics released *Booster Gold* v.2 #0, a tie-in to the 1994 event series *Zero Hour: Crisis in Time*. Like the Deadpool tie in to 1984's Secret Wars, *Booster Gold* v.2 #0 added another point of view to an already ancient event without making much of an impact on the event itself. However, *Booster Gold* v.2 #0 was a prime example of the retroactive canon that was popular throughout the Aluminum Age. It was an issue that ultimately served no larger purpose other than to reference an event that gained fame among comic book fans and give those fans the chance to see a well-liked villain once again without causing any real alterations to be made to the past event.

Some comics have become well known enough among long-time fans to warrant their own anniversary celebrations, either in the form of new collected editions of the series or in the form of a continuation of the original series published a number of years later. To celebrate the

twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *Marvels*, Marvel released a one issue epilogue to the 1994 series that was written and drawn by the original creative team. The epilogue continued to follow Phil Sheldon in his interaction with superheroes in the years since 1974, including his encounters with Chris Claremont's team of X-Men and hero Nova. *Marvels Epilogue* allows the series to end on a hopeful note—unlike the decidedly depressing note that the series originally ended on—and it bridges the gap between the original series and one of its tie-ins, *Marvels: Eye of the Camera* more completely.[161]

Comic book producers have attempted to encourage new fans to read older series. Both Marvel and DC have begun publishing facsimile editions of their most famous issues. For instance, Marvel published a facsimile edition of *New Mutants* v.1 #98, which featured the first appearance of the character Deadpool, while DC published a facsimile of *Green Lantern* v.2 #85, the issue where Green Arrow's sidekick is revealed to have been taking drugs. Everything about these facsimiles is identical to the original issues, except, of course, the price tag. The facsimiles retail for the same price as modern comics (between $3 and $5), while the original issues cost much less. In addition to gaining interest in older series, the facsimiles allow DC and Marvel to make a profit with next to no investment as they do not have to pay writers or artists to draw and write new stories and can instead make still more money off of an already published and adored story.

Despite recycling a number of the plotlines from the Dark Age and earlier ages, the Aluminum Age represented a departure from a number of the narrative and artistic conventions of the Dark Age thanks in no small part to the introduction of Marvel's Ultimate Universe. Societal and cultural shifts following the September 11th Attacks put an end to the ever-

[161] Kurt Busiek (w), Alex Ross (p, i), "[Untitled]," *Marvels Epilogue* #1 (September, 2019), Marvel Comics.

escalating forms of violence that characterized the Dark Age, and the boom in comic book films altered the types of stories that the larger industry told. The unprecedented levels of mainstream attention directed at the comic book industry in the Aluminum Age encouraged the continued increase in diversity that developed throughout the Dark and Aluminum Ages, but a lot of comic books still adhere to traditions in order to please what is still an incredibly insular sub-culture. The recent use of comic books as transmedial objects has opened the comic sub-culture to the wider world in recent years and exposed its problems to that wider world, but comic fans still tend to shun the mainstream, so efforts to make comics appeal to more casual movie fans have been slow to bear fruit.

This recycling of characters, situations, and storylines paints a distinctly postmodern picture of the comic book industry. Comics in the Aluminum Age developed a form of literature in which the characters and storylines could be recycled and retold countless times through transmedial adaptations and additions to the original text. Adding the Aluminum Age to the age system allows researchers to more closely examine the ways in which Aluminum Age comics interact with the culture in which they were produced. In this way, comics are elevated from a piece of popular media to a form of literature worthy of the same examination that is given to other genres. Comic books and superheroes were an integral part of American culture by the twenty-first century, and the distain with which they have been treated by the academic world has led to the neglect of their significance in the study of popular culture and American culture. As comics continue to be informed by the world in which they are created, the more they will inform the culture around them.

The lack of any centralized, concentrated effort to organize the history of comic books made determining when ages began and ended difficult. Most ages ended because there was a

shift in the types of stories being told in comic books. For instance, the Golden Age ended because superhero comics were abandoned by readers and producers in favor of other genres, while the Silver Age came to a gradual close as writers and artists began to include more realism in their stories. So it was for the Dark Age. Narrative conventions that were staples of the medium for over ten years became less prevalent in 2001. Comics became less violent and more diverse. Hollywood took full advantage of comic books as a source of blockbuster films. These changes make the differences between books published in the Dark Age and Aluminum Age readily apparent. The changes to comic book narratives and the industry that began in 2001 more than justify the start of a new age, and attempting to include Aluminum Age books in the Dark Age does a disservice to both ages.

5 CONCLUSION

The age system was created by mistake in a little-known fan publication from 1961. Before comic book fans filled convention halls in San Diego, discussions between them were relegated to the pages of science fiction fan publications. In the 1960s a concentrated effort was made to connect comic book fans through both fan publications and the letters pages of mainstream comics. Through these early connections, fans were able to communicate well enough to create a system that could be used to discuss the books they loved so much. Over the following fifty years, the system grew to become the dominant method for organizing the history of comics. This growth was undertaken by fans who often never met or consulted with each other before unknowingly naming an age. Later, ages were named through concentrated efforts; Mark Voger, for example, gave the Dark Age its name. No one ever formed a committee, however, to vote on the name of a new age, however. Compared to other areas of academic

study, comic book scholarship has been remarkably decentralized. The level of control that fans have had on the ways that comic book history is organized is unheard of in other areas of study.

Much of the earliest comic book scholarship was undertaken by amateur scholars and comic book collectors. Until the 1980s, the academic world had not realized the potential in studying children's literature, and comics were widely thought of as something that all but the most immature individuals would grow out of. As such, the publications put out by early, self-taught comic book scholars/fans were not directed at the academic world.[162] These fans created organizational system that suited their needs with little to no interference from the larger world of academia. The age system was later adopted by the industry itself as a convenient way to organize their own books, and some academic scholars use the system for their own research. Efforts to bring any real standardization to the age system have repeatedly failed, due to the diffuse nature of comic book scholarship. Additionally, efforts to apply academic language to the age system have failed to grasp what made the age system appealing to fans in the first place. By applying inaccessible academic language to the age system, academic scholars lock the same people that created the system out of any additions to the system. Scholarly additions to the age system also tend to focus heavily on the content of comics that fall into any given age rather than taking into account the context in which a comic was published. Any additions made to the age system must be made with the original intentions of the creators in mind. Above all, the age system must continue to work for the people for which it was created. If an addition to the age system is of no use to the fans, then it is of no use to the system as a whole.

From the medium's first faltering steps in the Platinum Age, to the surprising success of superheroes in the Golden Age and the unprecedented sales numbers seen at the height of the

[162] Greg M. Smith, et.al., "Surveying the World of Contemporary Comics Scholarship," 139.

speculator bubble in the Dark Age, the changes in the content and form of comics makes a continuous, unbroken history difficult to maintain. The existing ages have been separated from each other by both major changes in the comic book industry and changes in the real world, which had immediate impacts on the realm of comics. By separating the history of comics into ages, researchers could better track the ways that comics have developed, and the steps that were taken to evolve the medium over time. The twentieth century transformed the comic book from a cheap advertising opportunity, to a massive transmedial entertainment industry with branches in nearly every form of popular media. The ability of comic book characters and stories to transition easily from one form of media to another created a new type of comic book industry that was more focused on creating stories that could be adapted into other media forms.

Given the popularity of stories from other ages, the recycling of storylines that gave the Aluminum Age its name should come as no real surprise. The Dark Age has not fully left modern comics as a number of Dark Age storylines came to be considered iconic among fans and were optioned for movies in the early twenty-first century. *The Dark Knight Rises,* the final film in Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy, pulled heavily from Batman storylines from the Dark Age, while some of Marvel Studio's most recent blockbusters, such as *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame,* rely on the iconic nature of the *Infinity Saga* from the 1990s to "click" with hardcore comic fans. The biggest names in comic books began to take chances in the later years of the Aluminum Age but still relied heavily on nostalgia and pre-existing knowledge within their fan bases to fuel a number of their projects. The trend toward sensationalism has also been on the decline recently but, given the number of books that rely on the nostalgia of the fanbase, such sensationalism is far from dead.

While the themes and trends of the Dark Age continue to influence and be recycled into the media being produced during the Aluminum Age, changes to that media, including the addition of minority characters and innovative art and narrative techniques, led to a shift from realism to revisionism as a narrative form, and creators have begun drawing from other sources for inspiration. The trend toward reconstructionism over realism and revisionism began in the Dark Age with the publication of Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross's *Marvels*. What started as a rebellion from the violence and hyper-realism present in revisionist comics from the Dark Age soon became the dominant mode of storytelling in the Aluminum Age. The introduction of the Ultimate Universe by Marvel Comics streamlined the sixty years of narrative that often acted as an obstacle to recruiting new readers.

When coupled with the increased use of comics as transmedial objects, the differences between the Aluminum Age and the Dark Age become apparent, and the need for an addition to the age system of a whole is made obvious. These changes have made books published during the Aluminum Age different enough from the books published in the Dark Age to warrant the addition of a new age to the already established system of ages used to organize the history of comic books. So, the argument is not whether or not the age system should be used, but whether or not the age system needs to be updated to better reflect the changes made in both the comic book industry and the content of the comics published since 2001. Comics published in the Aluminum Age address topics pertinent to twenty-first century America by commenting on queer issues and the U.S.'s reactions to terrorist attacks. More than that, however, storytellers in the Aluminum Age used comics to pioneer new modes of storytelling in which characters can be reconstructed, resurrected, and recreated time and time again. As their own form of literature, comics can now be studied in relation to American culture, and the themes in comics—which

inform and are informed by American culture—can be better analyzed and used to make sense of the world.

The Aluminum Age was characterized by a recycled plotlines and increased references to previous issues and events, a reduction in the amount of general violence found in comics, the use of comics as transmedial objects, and an increase in the diversity of characters, particularly in the realm of Queer characters. Though many of these characteristics had their roots in the Dark Age, the Aluminum Age took those characteristics to extremes previously unimagined. The shift from to reconstructionism was well underway by 2001, and the surprising success of the *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* films, both released in or around 2001, foreshadowed the immense success now enjoyed by the comic book film. The new age "Aluminum Age," not only upholds the long-held tradition of "metallic" names for comic book ages; it also underscores the degree to which comic book stories from the recent past are easily recycled into multiple different mediums for new audiences.

The addition of the Aluminum Age separates the comics of the early twenty-first century from the comics of the late twentieth century. Comics in the Aluminum Age evolved to be different from those in the Dark Age in the ways described above, and the social commentary found in those comics reflects that evolution. By adding the Aluminum Age to the larger age system, better analysis of the comics published between 2001 and 2018 can be undertaken, and larger trends in the comic book industry can more easily be identified. The Aluminum Age is necessary for better comic book scholarship in the twenty-first century. By adding to the existing organizational structure for comic book history, scholars can better organize their research without excluding the earliest comic book scholars: the fans.

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

Comics – Individual Issues

Broome, John (w), Gil Kane (p), Joe Giella (i). "S.O.S Green Lantern!" *Showcase* v.1 #22 (October, 1959). National Comics Publications [DC Comics]: [2-7].

-----. "[Untitled]." *Marvels Epilogue* #1 (September, 2019). Marvel Comics.

Cameron, Don (w), and Jerry Robinson (p,i). "Swastika Over the White House." *Batman* v.1 #14 (January, 1943). Detective Comics Inc. [DC Comics]: [35-48].

David, Peter (w), Valentine De Landro (p), Marco Santucci (p,i), and Pat Davidson et al. (i), "[Untitled]," *X-Factor* v.3 #45 (August, 2009). Marvel Comics.

Ellis, Warren (w), Cliff Nielsen and Terese Nielsen (p,i). "[Untitled]." *Ruins* #1 (August, 1995). Marvel Comics.

-----. "[Untitled]." *Ruins* #2 (September, 1995). Marvel Comics.

Englehart, Steve (w), Frank Robbins (p), and Frank Giacoia (i). "Nomad: No More." *Captain America* v.1 #183 (March, 1975). Marvel Comics.

Englehart, Steve (w), Herb Trimple (p), Frank Giacoia and Mike Esposito (i). "Cap's Back!" *Captain America* v.1 #184 (April, 1975). Marvel Comics.

Englehart, Steve (w), Sal Buscema (p), and Vince Colletta (i). "Before the Dawn!" *Captain America* v.1 #175 (July, 1974). Marvel Comics.

Finger, Bill (w), Martin Nodell (p, i). "The Origin of Green Lantern." *All-American Comics* v.1 #16 (July, 1940). All-American Comics, Inc. [DC Comics]: [2-9].

Fox, Gardner (w), Mike Sekowsky (p), Bernard Sachs (i). "Metamorpho Says – No!" *Justice League of America* v.1 #42 (February, 1966). National Periodical Publications Inc. [DC Comics].

Johns, Geoff (w), Gary Frank (p, i). *Doomsday Clock* v.1 #1-12. (November 2017-December 2019). DC Comics.

Johns, Geoff, Grant Morrison, Greg Ruka, et. al. (w), Keith Griffin and Ken Lashley (p), Marvin Mariano and Greg Parkin (i). "Going Down." *52* #7 (August, 2006). DC Comics.

Liefeld, Rob and Fabian Nicieza (w), Rob Liefeld (p,i). "The Beginning of the End Part 1." *The New Mutants* v.1 #98 (February, 1991). Marvel Comics.

Lobdell, Scott (w), Mark Pacella (p), and Dan Panosian (i). "The Walking Wounded." *Alpha Flight* v.1 #106 (March, 1992). DC Comics.

Loveness, Jeff (w), Brad Walker (p), Andrew Hennessy and Norm Rapmund (i). "The Death of Superman." *Tales of the Dark Multiverse: The Death of Superman* #1 (December, 2019). DC Comics.

Todd McFarlane (w, p, i). "Sabotage, Part 1." *Spider-Man* v.1 #16 (November, 1991). Marvel Comics.

Nicieza, Fabian (w), and Rob Liefeld (w, p, i). "Battle Cry (Prelude to Sabotage)." *X-Force* v.1 #3 (October 1991). Marvel Comics.

O'Neil, Dennis (w), Neal Adams (p, i), and Dick Giordano (i). "Snowbirds Don't Fly." *Green Lantern* v.2 #85-86 (August/September-October/November, 1971). National Periodical Publications Inc. [DC Comics].

Schiff, Jack (w), Bob Kane (p), and Jerry Robinson (i). "The Two Futures." Batman v.1 #15 (March, 1943). Detective Comics Inc. [DC Comics]: [33-46].

Siegel, Jerry (w), Wayne Boring (a). *Superman*. February 16-19, 1942. McClure Syndicate.

Snyder, Scott (w), Greg Capullo (p), Jonathan Glapion (i). "[Untitled]." *Dark Nights: Metal* v.1 #4 (February 2018). DC Comics.

Snyder, Scott and Kyle Higgins (w), Javier Fernandez (a), "[Untitled]." *Tales from the Dark Multiverse: Batman: Knightfall* #1 (December, 2019). DC Comics.

Straczyski, Michael J. (w), John Romita Jr. (p), and Scott Hana (i). "Stand Tall." *Amazing Spider-Man* v.2 #36 (December 2001). Marvel Comics.

Comics – Collections

Bendis, Brian Michael (w), Leinil Yu (p), and Mark Morales (i). *Secret Invasion*. Edited by Tom Brevoort. New York: Marvel Comics, 2008.

Bunn, Cullen (w), Matteo Lolli, and Matteo Buffagni (p, i). *Deadpool's Secret Secret Wars.* New York: Marvel Comics, 2015.

Busiek, Kurt (w), Alex Ross (a). *Marvels*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2009.

Cooke, Darwyn Brian Azzarello, et al. (w), Amanda Conner, J.G. Jones, et al. (p,i). *Before Watchmen* (2012). DC Comics.

Johns, Geoff (w), Phil Jimenez et. al. (p), Andy Lanning, et. al. (i). *Infinite Crisis*. New York: DC Comics, 2007.

Millar, Mark (w), Steve McNiven (p), Dexter Vines et. al. (i). *Civil War*. New York: Marvel Comics, 2007.

Rieber, John Ney (w), John Cassaday (p, i). *Captain America: The New Deal*. Edited by Stuart Moore and Joe Quesada. New York: Marvel Comics, 2018.

Waid, Mark (w), and Alex Ross (a). *Kingdom Come*. New York: DC Comics, 1997.

Magazine/Newspaper Articles

"Comic-Book Hearing to Start Tomorrow." *New York Times*. April 20, 1954.

"Comic Book Hearings Set." *New York Times*. May 27, 1954.

"Industry Sales Records in 1993 Shadowed by Collapse of Speculator Boom," The Comics Journal #166. February, 1994.

Lupoff, Dick. "Rebirth." *Comic Art* v.1 #1, 1961.

Mangels, Andy. "Out of the Closet and into the Comics: Gays in Comics: The Creations and the Creators Part 1." *Amazing Heroes* #143, June 15, 1988.

Online Sources

Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. "The Comics Code of 1954." Accessed October 16, 2019. cbldf.org/the-comics-code-of-1954/.

Shooter, Jim. "Secrets of the Secret Wars." JimShooter.com - Writer. Creator. Large Mammal. Last Modified 4 April 2011. Accessed April 11, 2019. jimshooter.com/2011/04/secrets-of-secret-wars.html/.

Secondary Sources

Books

Burke, Liam. The Comic Book Film Adaptation, Jackson Mississippi: The University Press of Mississippi, 2015. Kindle.

Duncan, Randy and Michael J. Smith. *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2009.

Khoury, George. *Image Comics: The Road to Independence*. Raleigh, North Carolina: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2007.

Kidman, Shawna. *Incorporating Comics: How the Business of Comics Became the Business of Hollywood.* Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019.

Levitz, Paul. *75 Years of DC Comics: The Art of Modern Mythmaking*. Koln, Germany: Taschen, 2010.

Martin, Geoff and Erin Steuter. *Pop Culture Goes to War: Enlisting and Resisting Militarism in the War on Terror*. Plymouth, United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2010.

Nyberg, Amy Kiste. *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code.* Jackson, Mississippi: The University Press of Mississippi, 1998.

Overstreet, Robert M. ed. *The Overstreet Comics Book Price Guide*, 48th ed. Hunt Valley, Maryland: Gemstone Publishing, 2018.

Rosenkranz, Patrick. *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution 1963-1975*. Seattle, Washington: Fantagraphics Books, 2008.

Stevens, J. Richard. *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence: The Evolution of a National Icon*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015.

Thurman, Kevin and Julian Darius, *Voyage in Noise: Warren Ellis and the Demise of Western Civilization*. Edwardsville, Illinois: Sequart Research & Literacy Organization, 2013. Kindle.

Tye, Larry. *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero*. New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2012.

Voger, Mark. *The Dark Age: Grim, Great, and Gimmicky Post-Modern Comics.* Raleigh, North Carolina: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2006.

Weldon, Glen. *The Caped Crusade: Batman and the Rise of Nerd Culture*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017.

Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Young, Paul. *Frank Miller's Daredevil and the Ends of Heroism*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016.

Journal Articles/Book Chapters

Blumberg, Arnold T. "Promotional Comics: The Marketing of a Medium." In *The Overstreet Price Guide*, 48th ed., edited by Robert Overstreet, 305-308. Hunt Valley, Maryland: Gemstone Publishing, 2018.

Darowski, Joseph J. "Searching for Meaning in 'The Death of Superman.'" In *Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*. Edited by Joseph J. Darowski, 166-176. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 2012.

Dittmer, Jason. "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no.3 (Sep. 2005): 626-643.

Hall, Justin. Introduction to *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics*. Seattle, Washington: Fantagraphics Books, 2013.

Hayton, Christopher J. and David L. Albright. "Oh Captain! My Captain!" In *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays*, edited by Robert G. Weiner, 15-23. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2009.

Johnson, Jeffrey K. "This Isn't Your Grandfather's Comic Book Universe: The Return of the Golden Age Superman." In *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, edited by Joseph J. Darowski, 199-208. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Publishers Inc., 2012.

Kvaran, Kara. "SuperGay: Depictions of Homosexuality in Mainstream Superhero Comics." In *Comics as History Comics as Literature: Roles of the Comic Book in Scholarship, Society, and Entertainment*, edited by Annessa Ann Babic, 141-156. Lanham, Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014. Kindle.

Lendrum, Rob. "Queering Super-Manhood: Superhero Masculinity, Camp and Public Relations as a Textual Framework." *International Journal of Comic Art* 7, no.1 (Spring/Summer 2005): 287-303.

Smith, Greg M. "It Ain't Easy Studying Comics." *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 110-112.

Smith, Greg M., Thomas Andrae, Scott Bukatman, and Thomas LaMarre. "Surveying the World of Contemporary Comics Scholarship: A Conversation." *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 135-147.

-----. "Guarding the Home Front." In *Batman: The War Years 1939-1945*, edited by Michelle Faulkner and Frank Oppel, 135-136. New York: Chartwell Books, 2015.

-----. "In for the Duration." In *Superman: The War Years 1938-1945*, edited by Michelle Faulkner and Frank Oppel, 197-198. New York: Chartwell Books, 2015.

-----. "The Home Front War." In *Batman: The War Years 1939-1945*. Edited by Michelle Faulkner and Frank Oppel, 100-101. New York: Chartwell Books, 2015.

-----. "Victory." In *Batman: The War Years 1939-1945*. Edited by Michelle Faulkner and Frank Oppel, 284-285. New York: Chartwell Books, 2015.

Tilly, Carol L. "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications that Helped Condemn Comics." *Information & Culture* 47, no. 4 (2012): 383-413.

Walton, David. "'Captain America Must Die: The Many Afterlives of Steve Rogers." In *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays*, edited by Robert G. Weiner, 160-175. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2009.

Dissertations/Theses

Jones, Dyfrig. "Islamic Invaders: *Secret Invasion* and the Post-9/11 World of Marvel." Unpublished manuscript Bangor University, 2019.

Scott, Cord A. "Comics and Conflict: War and Patriotically Themed Comics in American Cultural History from World War II Through the Iraq War." PhD. diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2011.

Online Sources

Ohanesian, Liz. "DC Comics Writer and Chief Creative Officer Geoff Johns Explains the Comic Books That Inspired Him." *L.A. Weekly*. Last modified, 24 May 2016. www.laweekly.com/arts/dc-comics-writer-and-chief-creative-officer-geoff-johns-explains-the-comic-books-that-inspired-him-4184145.

Riesman, Abraham. "The Secret History of Ultimate Marvel, the Experiment that Changed Superheroes Forever." Vulture. Last modified Mary 25, 2015. Accessed March 11, 2020. www.vulture.com/2015/05/secret-history-of-ultimate-marvel.html.

Sieczkowski, Cavan. "'Batwoman' Authors Exit, Claim DC Comics Banned Gay Marriage Storyline." *Huffington Post*. Last modified September 5, 2013. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/batwoman-dc-comics-gay-marriage_n_3873508.

Wilonsky, Robert. "The Brave and the Bold - October 3, 2001." *SF Weekly*. Last modified October 3, 2001. Accessed October 21, 2019. www.sfweekly.com/culture/the-brave-and-the-bold/.