

Incoherent Texts: The Chronotope of the Superhero

Abstract “Discontinuities and Multiplicities,” complicates the exploration of superhero revision by examining the genre in terms of narrative temporality. Eco’s famous description of the genre’s sense of time as *oneiric* is supplemented by approaches drawn from several narrative theorists as well as more superhero-specific scholarship. This approach elucidates significant shifts in the role that revision has played in the construction of superhero texts in the years following Eco’s observations, particularly in the wake of the generic transition from what Henry Jenkins has identified as a paradigm of *continuity* to one of *multiplicity*. While this transition has been accompanied by corporate and narrative restrictions limiting radical content, modes of superhero revision have emerged that challenge generic orthodoxies and resist the imposition of continuity and cohesion as ultimate goals.

Keywords Superhero • Continuity • Multiplicity • Umberto Eco
Revision • Narrative time

The alteration of fictional characters and worlds to suit changing times and perspectives does not begin with the superhero. Mythic cycles were used by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides for radically different purposes; two distinct versions of the creation story appear back to back in the Book of Genesis; Shakespeare’s endings have been rewritten to accommodate audiences looking for happier resolutions. The superhero

is distinct in that such revisions have been present almost from its generic inception. There are many possible reasons: narrative seriality, generic status, industry practices regarding the production and consumption of American comic books, or just a convergence of medial and culture practices that reached critical mass. The superhero has unfolded in a compositional environment in which the authority of prior versions is particularly unstable. "Whether the superhero finds its roots in ancient mythologies or takes shape as the quintessential commodity of the 21st century's world marketplace, it must be acknowledged that as long as the superhero has been in existence, it has been 'in the making,' working through a series of revisions" (Wandtke 5).

While it is often difficult to agree upon a starting point of the history of a genre, the superhero's inaugural moment is relatively uncontroversial: the first issue of *Action Comics* in 1938 featuring the debut of its first avatar, Superman. Neither Superman nor the genre arose *ex nihilo*; the superhero was an original, not an aboriginal, creation. The qualities of the superhero emerged from a *bricolage* of traditions: early American Science Fiction and the fan culture it stimulated; English-language translations and popularized appropriations of Nietzschean philosophy; pulp fiction characters such as Doc Savage and the Shadow; newspaper comic strips such as Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* and Hall Foster's *Tarzan* and the early 1930s American film versions they inspired; contemporaneous Hollywood fascination with the extraordinary as exemplified by the popularity of horror films; the residual popularity of Houdini in popular culture and consciousness; the rise of celebrity bodybuilders Eugen Sandow and Charles Atlas through their manipulation of emerging media marketing strategies; E. C. Segar's newspaper strip *Thimble Theater* with its breakout character Popeye, followed by the elastic violence and frenetic energy of the Fleischer Studio's *Popeye* animated shorts. Perhaps the most distinctive quality of Superman is that in him these disparate and disconnected traditions became conjoined; after the superhero, they are forever linked as tributaries flowing into common waters.

The superhero's powerful and historical associations with the comics medium and comic book format played a major role in the genre's capacity to undergo revisions. The formal and economic potentials of comic book composition suited the superhero genre far more ably than the contemporaneous mass media of film and radio could:

Comic books could carry heroes beyond the limits of possibility imposed by radio (sounds without pictures and thus without depth or significant personification) and film (sounds with pictures, but constrained by technology). Radio, short on data, gave the consumer's imagination too much latitude, while film, rife with data, refused to give it enough. Comic books, however accidentally, managed to split the difference. They could show whatever the artist could draw, their lines and colors directing imagination, their balloon-held texts defining time and space. Comic book artists and writers could produce that which could be conceived, which was more than the creators of motion pictures and radio programs could claim. (Savage 7)

Despite the greater cost and lesser aesthetic range of representational possibilities, other media were quick to capitalize on the popularity of the new genre. From weekly radio shows and cliffhanger weekly film serials, to television and major studio film franchises, to the newer media of platform and online gaming, superhero fiction continues to be a multimedia narrative form. Each of these mediums involved in the production of superhero narratives adds further layers of complexity to the revisionary nature of the genre, in part due to competing economic and artistic priorities. Wandtke observes that "strategic compromises are made with artists who have other visions of the superhero and how that hero might look in a new medium" (29). The resulting versions themselves exerted influence on subsequent versions, "and then worked organically to revise their representations in other mediums, including comic books" (30).

The history of the genre can be read as a series of moments when prior meanings attached to the superhero had to change in order to accommodate differing media, shifting readerships, industrial standards, and societal norms. Thus Superman, representative of both icon and genre, undergoes several modifications over time:

In his earliest outings, he had been a kind of super-social worker, in the comic's words, a 'Champion of the Oppressed', reflecting the liberal idealism of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal....Then, when the Cold War came to America, the character evolved into a fantasy guardian of the world order: an all-powerful, and at times slightly portly-looking conservative, fighting for 'Truth, Justice and the American Way'. Later still, he would be revamped again for more cynical times. (Sabin 61)

Despite these multiple textual incarnations, each revised version of Superman remains the “same” character. This shared identity is in part a result of the visual dynamics of iconic representation: the familiar costume, color combinations, the famous Superman shield. Additionally, there are underlying consistencies of character and narrative that, while not fixed and immutable, provide a delimited range of possibilities beyond which the character could not properly be said to be revised, but rather transformed into something else. Thus, a Superman who employs lethal force with ease and regularity is a sign to audiences that this is not “really” Superman. Perhaps he is being controlled, or influenced by Red Kryptonite; perhaps the story itself is a non-canonical variant, a narrative practice familiar to the genre for much of its history. Of course, these “truths” by which we partially identify and accept the “reality” of Superman texts are themselves fluid, and subject to development, perhaps even reversal, as new narratives and new audiences emerge. In light of these and other factors, Superman is best understood not as a singularity, but rather as an ongoing text composed of multiple versions, each related to the other through a paradoxical interplay between identity and difference.

Of all the effects that perpetual and ongoing revision has had on superhero fiction, the most idiosyncratic involve the ways that time operates within, and as will be seen, between narratives. Umberto Eco’s 1972 essay “The Myth of Superman,” in many ways the foundational narratological study of the superhero, argues that the tropes and strategies of the genre are best understood as both producers and products of a distinctive narrative temporality. Drawing upon Superman comic books of the 1950s and 1960s, Eco observes two contradictory yet equally essential narrative demands at work: the mythical, characterized by the determinate nature of its story material, by the definitive fact that the stories being recounted have already been established; and the *novelistic*, which, rather than recounting the already-having-happened, narrates events that can only become known through the unfolding of the text. This tension between the predictability of the superhero as modern mythic archetype, and the plot twists and surprises necessary to a readership cultivated to expect a degree of novelistic uncertainty, leads to a temporal paradox characteristic of the genre, which Eco describes as the consumption of character:

To act, then, for Superman, as for any other character (or for each of us), means to ‘consume himself....Now Superman cannot ‘consume’ himself, since a myth is ‘inconsumable’...Superman, then, must remain ‘inconsumable’ and at the same time be ‘consumed’ according to the ways of everyday life. He possesses the characteristics of timeless myth, but is accepted only because his activities take place in our human and everyday world of time. (111)

This distinctive temporal incongruity is the constitutive factor of what Mikhail Bakhtin would deem the superhero’s *chronotope*: “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). For Bakhtin, the chronotope functions as a way of understanding and distinguishing between different narrative genres:

The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic *generic* significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic. (84–85)

What is true for the image of man proves so for the image of Superman as well, and I will henceforth use the term in describing the narrative temporality within which superhero fiction takes place.

The conflicting narrative demands of myth and novel culminate in an anomalous chronotope, which Eco famously compared to that of the dream state:

The stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate— of which the reader is not aware at all— where what has happened before and what has happened after appear extremely hazy. The narrator picks up the strand of the event again and again, as if he had forgotten to say something and wanted to add details to what had already been said. (114)

Eco notes two distinctive modes of revision that have evolved in response to these oppositional narrative temporalities. The first of these involves the manner in which superhero narratives balance the mythic demand that the hero’s story be predetermined, fixed and stable with the novelistic demands of contemporary readers for new material. Superman

has a fictional past seemingly as immutable as that of Hercules. He was born on Krypton; saved by his parents from his home planet's doom by being launched in a small rocket; discovered after landing on Earth by the wholesome couple Jonathan and Martha Kent, who raise him as their own; grew up to become reporter Clark Kent, whose mild-mannered *persona* serves as direct counterpart to the courage and power of Superman. However, this fixed past is much more fluid than appears at first glance. Due to the fact of ongoing textual production, Superman's fictional past is constantly in a state of potential retroactive reconstruction; textual additions made in the present emanate backwards in the character's narrative temporality, and reconstruct that temporality with revisions that then function in future texts as if they had always already been part of the story:

It occurs, then, that along with Superman stories, Superboy stories are told, that is, stories of Superman when he was a boy, or a tiny child under the name of Superbaby. At a certain point, Supergirl appears on the scene. She is Superman's cousin, and she, too, escaped from the destruction of Krypton. All of the events concerning Superman are retold in one way or another to account for the presence of this new character.... (114)

Superhero fans and scholars alike recognize this type of recursive textual addition as the phenomenon known as *retroactive continuity*, which involves composing within the fluid spaces of the narrative past. In theory, this retroactivity is as never-ending as Superman's familiar battle for Truth, Justice, and the American Way; as long as new Superman texts are being produced, his past is always capable of being revised, as for example the afore-mentioned slogan has been to reflect the character's shifting status as nationalistic symbol.

Whereas the tactic of retroactive continuity involves reworking the past, Eco's second pattern characterizes the manner in which superhero fiction can work in a narrative future. As previously asserted by Eco, the disjointed temporality of the oneiric climate precludes the superhero narrative from engaging in any plot developments that involve the kind of definitive change characteristic of the novelistic mode. In order to negotiate the narrative explorations of such possibilities, a new mode of hypothetical fictionality emerges, a mode that the Superman comics analyzed by Eco designated as *Imaginary Tales*:

If Superman married Lois Lane, it would of course be another step toward his death, as it would lay down another irreversible premise; nevertheless, it is necessary to find continually new narrative stimuli and to satisfy the 'romantic' demands of the public. And so it is told "what would have happened *if* Superman had married Lois." The premise is developed in all of its dramatic implications, and at the end is the warning: Remember, this is an 'imaginary' story which in truth has not taken place. (114–115)

These imaginary stories, familiar to all readers of pre-1985 DC comics, are thus in the odd ontological position of being fictional fictions. As texts, they exist; they are read, remembered, are capable of affecting those who read them; however, they are explicitly non-canonical, and thus are not meant to be incorporated into the larger intertextual framework that is both constructed from, and serves as foundation of, each individual story.

While retroactive continuity and the imaginary tale are storytelling devices characteristic of the distinct chronotope of the superhero, chronic ruptures as such are fundamental to several narrative genres, and arguably to storytelling itself. The fact that stories are composed by and through such ruptures is a basic premise of formalist theories of narrative, a product of what Seymour Chatman calls "its doubly-temporal logic," in which time operates "not only 'externally' (the duration of the presentation of the novel, film, play) but also 'internally' (the duration of the sequence of events that constitute the plot). The first operates in that dimension of narrative called Discourse (or *récit* or *syuzhet*), the second in that called Story (*histoire* or *fabula*)" (9).

A commonplace illustration is the typical detective story, in which the reader encounters various characters and events in the text (*syuzhet*) as clues that must be re-sequenced and re-constituted into a logical story (*fabula*). Causality is frequently inverted in this narrative genre; what is encountered first in the text, the result of the crime, is often the final, or close to the final, sequential element of the *fabula*. The detective in these narratives functions as an inscribed model reader, piecing together disparate discoveries of various clues into a coherent story rooted in causal connections: the solution to the crime, of which the original mysterious puzzle pieces were the consequences.

The ability to create and manipulate discrepancies between the two temporalities indicated by the distinction between the time of the *syuzhet* and the time of the *fabula* is a characteristic, perhaps even essential

aspect of the act of narration: "This duality not only renders possible all the temporal distortions that are commonplace in narratives... More basically, it invites us to consider that one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme" (Metz 18). In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette catalogues different patterns of variations between the two temporalities, which he calls *anachronies* (35). The process of retroactive continuity can be viewed as an extended form of *analepsis*, a form of anachrony that Genette defines as "any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point of the story where we are at any given moment..." (40).

Similarly, texts in which multiple levels of narrative are juxtaposed in order to highlight their relative fictional status are also commonplace. Odysseus' recounting of his previous adventures to the Phaeacian court in Books 9–12 of *The Odyssey* (which is also an example of *analepsis*); the play within the play of *Hamlet*; the narrative of the Grand Inquisitor, presented as the fictional composition of the fictional Ivan Karamazov; all are among the more famous examples of the technique of stories embedded within stories that can function to increase the reader's awareness of multiple levels of fictionality within a given narrative.

The narrative dimension that transforms these commonplace anachronies into the temporal anomalies of the superhero chronotope is rooted in the principle of *continuity*. In order to understand superhero continuity, one must recognize that many superhero narratives are doubly inscribed. On one level, they are individual stories bound by the textual conditions of their transmission. However, each individual story is also part of vast and ongoing intertextual continuums that serve as the fictional "realities" in which they take place, described by Douglas Wolk as "a small element of one of two gigantic narratives, in which most major characters have thematic and metaphorical significance." (90–91) A majority of the most famous, and hence the most valuable, superheroes are the intellectual property of one of two major corporations: DC Comics and Marvel. Thus, Superman's fictional universe is composed not only of the narrative events that have "happened" to him; it is also extrapolated from texts featuring other characters sharing a common ownership. Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and hundreds of other fictional characters "inhabit" the same narrative continuity, that of the DC Universe. This intertextual relationship does not extend to other characters that are the property of different corporate masters: Spider-Man, Captain America, and the Fantastic Four, who, by virtue of their

common ownership by DC's main competitor, are part of the fictional continuity of the Marvel Universe.

These intertextualities are central to a narrative understanding of the genre, and they often signify a more important register of meaning than readings isolated from this larger context. When viewed independently, each story is limited, and follows traditional conventions of linear narrative temporality; however, as long as new superhero stories are being produced, each of the two continuities is still capable of being added to and revised:

New canonical texts are being added every month. Any definite metatextual resolution is therefore indefinitely postponed. That is to say, the DC or Marvel Universe is not finally defined until some future date when superhero texts cease to be published. In the meantime, new texts must be made sense of within continuity, or discarded as non-canonical. (Reynolds 43)

Intertextual continuity is in part an outgrowth of a shared quality of the many media that have contributed to the superhero genre: their reliance on the dynamics of serial production and consumption. Roger Hagerdorn defines serial narratives as those characterized "through the practice of offering a narrative text to consumers in isolated, materially independent units, available at different, but predictable time; in a word, in successive episodes" (28–29). The most evident distinctions between serial and non-serial narrative structure have to do with the negotiation of these preordained and hence predictable breaks in the presentation and consumption of texts:

While a classic text can be consumed however the consumer wishes, because he or she generally has material control over the text in its entirety before beginning to consume it, serials' mode of presentation places consumers at the whim of the medium that presents them (or, more precisely, at the whim of those who command the medium that presents serial texts). (28)

The distinctive temporal ruptures caused by a narrative whose mode of publication incorporates regular and predetermined breaks results in a great deal of emphasis on the development and maintenance of continuity. In the case of finite narratives whose means of transmission is staggered, this emphasis manifests itself in various tropes that have evolved to facilitate and stimulate audience reentry into the serial in order to ensure

the return of the consumer after the break: “At the most basic level, an episode of any one particular serial functions to promote continued consumption of later episodes of the same serial, which is specifically why the cliffhanger was born” (28).

Whether viewed individually or as part of the larger corporate continuums described above, most superhero narratives are not finite, but rather ongoing and potentially unending. John Ellis’ observations concerning the contrasts between cinema and television narratives are in many ways applicable to superhero narratives as well:

Cinema narration has a strong internal dynamic, a movement from an initial equilibrium that is disrupted towards a new harmony that is the end of the fiction. Broadcast TV narration has a more dispersed narrational form: it is extensive rather than sequential. Its characteristic mode is not one of final closure or totalizing vision; rather, it offers a continuous refiguration of events. (147)

Thus, in addition to the condition of double temporality, which it shares in common with all narratives, the chronotope of the superhero is characterized by interplay between the two-fold narrative levels of discrete episode and serial continuity.

While this interplay is not explicitly explored by Eco, he does recognize that the ambiguity at the root of the oneiric climate of the Superman narrative is closely related to the emergence of characters that appear (and reappear) in multiple texts, characters described by Eco as *inexhaustible* (120). Eco’s examples include the early-twentieth-century French villain Fantomas, the epicurean detective Nero Wolfe, and their respective entourages of accompanying characters and iterative plots. In the case of these types of multitextual characters, *fabula* material is derived from multiple *syuzhet* sources, published in diverse media and at different times. Sherlock Holmes, for example, has a *fabula* biography, built of events gleaned from the various texts in which the character has appeared. As with Superman, later texts can provide earlier biographical details: an example is “The Musgrave Ritual,” the seventeenth short story text (as published in *The Strand*) featuring the Holmes character. The events recounted in it, however, “predate” the previous sixteen tales when viewed as a part of Holmes’ fictional biography.¹

However, the recursive capacity of later Holmes texts to provide narrative events that “happened” earlier in the character’s *fabula* ended with

the death of Arthur Conan Doyle, or at least with the final publication of Conan Doyle-written texts. This is a critical point to keep in mind, especially as the character has continued to appear in various narrative media up to the present day. These post-Conan Doyle texts, however, possess ambiguous canonical status as *fabula* providers. Examples include the Basil Rathbone movies, produced first by Fox and later Universal Studios; Nicholas Meyer's *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* (1976); the recent television series reboots *Elementary* and *Sherlock*; and the aging detective in the sequel of sorts, *Mr. Holmes* (2015). These are texts that offer additions and revisions to the Holmes myth. However, it can be argued that they occur outside of the genuine *fabula* because of their questionable parentage: fictions once removed from the "genuine" fictional facts derived from the Conan Doyle texts.

The touchstone of authenticity provided by an original author is not without its own complications. Postmodern destabilizations of the construct of authorship are manifold. The fictional detective's continued presence in new texts composed after the death of his original author testifies to the fact that Holmes as fictional character has outlived Conan Doyle, not merely because he is still being read, but more importantly, because he is still being written. Despite his explicit exclusion in the following quote, Holmes now in fact belongs to that category defined by Will Brooker as:

...cultural icons, whose meanings long ago escaped the anchorage of whatever "original" text brought them into being, and whose identity is no longer inseparably tied to an individual author— as, say, Tarzan, Sherlock Holmes, Hamlet, and Don Quixote are still— but exist somewhere above and between a multiplicity of varied and often contradictory incarnations, both old and recent, across a range of cultural forms from computer games to novels. (Brooker 9)

Even if Holmes is granted this status, the sanctioning of the Conan Doyle texts as presenting the authentic Holmes, or at least the capacity for readers to view them as such, provides stability to the character's *fabula*, in much the same way that Eco's mythic narratives are stabilized by fact of their being fixed, their already-having-happened. Unlike Holmes and the other characters mentioned by Brooker, Superman's identity has never been tethered to any individual author or authors. The dynamics of comic book production and the economic subservience of creator's rights

to those of the publishers regarding intellectual property made such a basis for stability impossible. Superman comic book stories have been published continuously at the rate of at least once a month since 1938. They have been written and drawn by hundreds of “handlers,” each adding details that have an equal claim to *fabula* status. In addition, there have been films, cartoons, radio programs, and television series that also feature the character. The resulting mass-produced, collaboratively authored, frequently conflicting and even contradictory textual material disrupts any attempts to build a coherent continuity from such a disparate multitude. Shifting for a moment from Superman to another of these inexhaustible superheroes, his inevitable counterpoint Batman, the reader with an historical perspective is confronted with multiple exposures of the iconic figure: the gun-carrying vigilante Batman of the late 1930s who is not averse to killing criminals rather than simply arresting them; the patriotic symbol of law and order of the 1940s; post-code Batman tales in which a decidedly lighter interpretation takes over as the Caped Crusader encounters alien and extra-dimensional adversaries who qualify more as pests than threats; the camp Batman of the 1966 ABC television series; the *noir* influence of the 1970s O’Neill-Adams Batman; culminating for the time being in the current vogue Batman of Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* and the recent Christopher Nolan-directed films, in which the moral and psychological ambiguities inherent in the character are emphasized. Which of these is the “real” Batman? How does a reader rate these versions according to their relative ontological status as “true” fiction?

These and other questions raised by the ongoing interplay between the text of discrete episodic events and multitextual continuity renders superhero fiction somewhat problematic when one attempts to explain it by means of conventional narrative theories of temporality. However, the oneiric climate resonates far more with the temporal discontinuities of literary works that intentionally challenge and subvert the traditional relationship between story and discourse. Eco himself notes the similarities between the ruptured temporality of the superhero genre and the more experimental fictions of Joyce and Robbe-Grillet: “...a great deal of contemporary art...reflects paradoxical temporal situations, whose models, nevertheless, exist in the epistemological discussions of our times” (116).

As a result of this lack of intentionality, Eco, perhaps under the sway of the generic revulsion so common to discussions of the superhero, goes on to dismiss the Superman narratives as artistically inferior to literary works that experiment with non-mimetic relationships between story and discourse:

But it is a fact that, in works like *Finnegans Wake* or Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth*, the breakdown of familiar temporal relations happens in a conscious manner, on the part both of the writer and of the one who derives aesthetic satisfaction from the operation {...} The adventures of Superman, however, do not have this critical intention.... (116)

Leaving aside the question of whether intentionality is, should, or can be a criterion for distinguishing the relative value of these two categories of texts, it is worth exploring—as Eco does not—these parallels in greater detail. Critical categories such as those systematized by Genette, Brian Richardson notes, "...do not work if applied to many late modernist and postmodern texts, since they are predicated on distinctions that experimental writers are determined to preclude, deny, or confound..." (47). The fundamental manifestation of these preclusions, denials, and confusions is the willingness to challenge, or even reject, the *syuzhet/fabula* distinction, and thus to engage in what Richardson calls "a contestation of the opposition between story time and discourse time" (52).

This opposition can take several forms: Richardson delineates six different categories of postmodern narrative temporality. However, the literary examples he draws upon all share a common trait that distinguishes them from superhero chronotopography; when interpreted according to the *syuzhet/fabula* dichotomy, each exemplifies a finite and stable *syuzhet* that cannot or will not resolve into an equally stable or finite *fabula*. Considered as *discourse time*, the works of Joyce and Robbe-Grillet are singular and discrete. When a reader reaches the final *the* of *Finnegans Wake*, the physical boundaries of the text are at an end. One may or may not decide to proceed backwards from the unpunctuated definite article to the midsentence beginning word *riverrun*, and thereby close the ouroboric design. However, one will not wake up the next day to find that a sequel has been written, or additional pages composed; as discourse, it is a finished product. Even if discoveries are made at a future date that challenge our sense of the text as it is now accepted, the ensuing destabilization will occur through the discovery of absconded *syuzhet*, rather than the ongoing composition of new material.

Borges, drawing upon the first of Xeno's three paradoxes of motion, has termed this type of temporal disruption an *avatar of the tortoise* (202). The tortoise, given any kind of a head start, can never be overtaken by the swiftest of runners, Achilles, since the pursuer must first pass through an infinite number of midpoints. Thus, the Eleatic paradox becomes emblematic of all constructs of the infinite that are based upon

endless division of a finite measurement. The *syuzhet/fabula* relationship of these narratives is thus isomorphic to the relationship between the exterior and interior of the TARDIS, the iconic vehicle of *Doctor Who*'s the Doctor, himself an avatar of multiple revision: the finitude of the measurable and bound masks a potentially infinite space for exploration. To put it more colloquially: it's bigger on the inside.

The ongoing serial narrativity that is a hallmark of the superhero chronotope leads to an inverse situation: an indeterminate and unfinished *syuzhet*, delimited by the attempts at resolution and coherence characterized by the intertextual *fabula* of continuity. The irreconcilability of the ever-growing complexities of textual expansion with the demands of story and character continuity result in increasingly convoluted narrative tanglings; the superhero navigates an impossible path between the Scylla of overdetermined textual history, and the Charybdis of omnipresent demands for novelty, relevance, and change. In order to pass through, the superhero narrative has had to evolve beyond the iterative formulae that Eco observed. In order to best understand this evolution, a brief digression is required in order to expand upon one of the more pernicious tropes with which that the study of superhero revision ineluctably intersects: the organization of the history of the superhero into distinctive "ages" based on Hesiod's Ages of Man.

Historical studies of the superhero have frequently, and not without controversy, made use of a terminological framework that divides eras into ages, the two most prominent of which are the Golden and Silver Ages. The story goes something like this: the incredible commercial success of Superman, as the first "breakout star" of the still-fledgling format, was the impetus behind the initial phase of growth of the American comic book industry and led to a period of the flowering and flourishing of the superhero, the Golden Age. Such a categorization is by its very nature retroactive, and testifies to the existence of later eras that are both product of and produced by a sense of diachronic discontinuity. Indeed, it is typical of histories of the superhero to speak of at least two distinct periods of flourish, adding the designation a Silver Age to mark the return of the superhero to prominence and popularity in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The precise delineations of these ages are of course flexible. One can argue for the "end" the golden age simultaneously with the Second World War, the adoption of the code, or the cancellation of Superman's (and DC Comics') main rival in popularity during the 1940s, Fawcett's Captain Marvel. In addition, while Geoff Klock and others argue persuasively

for the primacy of Marvel Comics' new wave as starting point of the Silver Age, an equal case can be made for DC's revival of an updated version of the Golden-Age hero the Flash in 1956.

The use of this Age schema is controversial, and has met with criticism and resistance among comics scholars, who see it as a historiographical approach that reifies and objectifies its subject, while also distorting the overall history of the American comic book by conflating it with the history of the superhero genre.² However well-founded these critiques may be, the more important fact for students of superhero revision is that a discernable fissure in the history of the genre is perceived to exist, emended by the construction of Silver-Age narratives that performed distinctive revisions to the generic contours of the superhero from earlier Golden-Age norms.

There are several possible reasons for this break: the end of World War II; the establishment of the Comics Code Authority³; the chasm between the simplistic morality of the superhero and the growing ambiguities of a nuclear age; however, for the purposes of this study, the reasons behind the rupture are less important than the fact that the Silver-Age revisions of the superhero genre followed two main strategies. The first involved the invention of new characters based on older, Golden-Age names and models. This was the method of preference at DC; for example, the Silver Age Flash retained the name and powers of his Golden Age predecessor, but acquired a new costume, origin, and secret identity. Marvel's approach was more radical: the invention of new heroes with newer sensibilities more in touch with a readership of baby boomers whose adolescence was shaped, not by Depression and World Wars, but by television, cold wars, and nuclear anxieties. These new heroes embodied fears and vulnerabilities absent from the Golden Age paradigms: romantic insecurities, money troubles, workplace anxiety. Far from alleviating these concerns, having super powers exacerbated them. The untroubled paragons of virtue who kept us safe became super people with super problems.

It is important to remember that this rupture was not the catalyst of the superhero's capacity to undergo revision as much as it posed a particularly notable compositional challenge to the producers of sanctioned narratives. Indeed, fluidity and adaptability are among the superhero genre's most constant and characteristic qualities, and have allowed the superhero to survive, and even thrive, while other popular genres faded from once-dominant levels of popularity. Amy Nyberg has observed how this plasticity contributed to the superhero's survival in the wake of the restrictions of the code on comic book content:

The biggest impact that the code has had on the content of comic books was the maintenance of the superhero comic as the dominant genre in the years following the code's adoption. The code discourages experimentation with its strict prohibitions on subject matter; as a result, the superhero comic, the staple of the industry, is reworked in endless variations that seldom pose a challenge to the code or to public perception of the medium. (Nyberg 158–159)

The Fantastic Four, perhaps the first completely original superhero creation associated with this post-code sensibility, sounded the first notes of the overture of the movement away from Eco's oneiric climate and towards more conscious and reflexive explorations of the distinctive narrative qualities of the genre. Although not as well known outside of aficionado circles as other Marvel Comics' Silver Age icons Spider-Man and the X-Men, they serve as effective paradigms of a new kind of superhero, and the new narrative tropes that accrued around them. Their original textual appearance, published in the May 1961 first issue of the eponymous comic book, contains both the first telling of the group's origin, as well as their first adventure, a battle against the Mole Man and his underground minions. The origin establishes the basics of who they are and how they came to be: Reed Richards, scientist, recruits his girlfriend, Sue Storm, her teenage brother, Johnny, and pilot Ben Grimm to prematurely commandeer the first flight to the moon. Grimm is understandably reluctant and concerned about the dangers. By simultaneously reminding him of the cold war space race and questioning his courage, Sue goads him into agreeing to pilot the spacecraft. As predicted by Grimm, the ship is bombarded by cosmic rays, forcing them to turn back unsuccessfully. Upon landing, the effects of the rays become manifest: Richards gains the ability to stretch his body as if it were elastic, much like the classic Golden Age character Plastic Man; Sue can become invisible; Johnny can burst into living flame, mirroring yet another Golden Age hero, the original Human Torch; and Grimm is transformed into an orange, rock-skinned monster, resembling the horror characters that dominated the comic book industry between the Golden and Silver Age superheroics. After choosing appropriate new names (Mr. Fantastic; the Invisible Girl; the Human Torch; the Thing), they make a pact to use their great powers to help mankind.

The standard narrative tropes of the genre today have been so influenced by the Fantastic Four that it can be difficult to see what was so radical about this first telling of the group's origin. Simply put, several

elements of the story reflect a moral ambiguity far more pronounced than any found in its Golden Age predecessors. While science and technology had been a standard narrative device for the acquisition of super powers (the original Flash is one of many examples), it was a fundamentally benign force, a wonder akin to the magic that produced a Captain Marvel. With the Fantastic Four, science is unknown, dangerous, threatening: as in Hollywood science fiction and horror films of the 1950s, it is an instrument that can both produce and resolve chaos: fitting fodder for audience sensibilities shaped in the early era of nuclear anxiety. This affect is recapitulated in the interrelationships within the team: Grimm's anger at Richards, evident even before the transformation, only increases with his bitterness at his now-monstrous appearance. Such open antagonism was new to the genre, as Stan Lee, credited writer and controversial co-creator of the Fantastic Four, noted:

Members of superhero teams were always the best of friends, with never a cross word between them. Good guys were never sarcastic, never bitter; yet here was a team with a raving malcontent, one whose paranoia was to increase with succeeding issues. (Lee 72)

While this introduction of grey areas of morality is extremely important to the history of the superhero genre, the most important innovation of the Marvel Silver Age that relates to narrative temporality involves the great extension of plot continuity binding together serial episodes. Like soap opera characters, the Fantastic Four had ongoing personal issues that unfolded in secondary storylines that continued even when the primary story issues involving the super-villainous threat of the month were resolved. Such strengthened continuity did not eradicate the oneiric climate described by Eco, but it did add considerably to the narrative complexities that evolved to accommodate simultaneous demands upon the reader to forget and remember past story events. The 1961 textual version of the Fantastic Four's origin has been retold several times. Each subsequent textual inscription is in fact revisionary, and involves alterations to account for the contrast between the temporal discontinuities of the narrative, and the historical changes that have occurred in the real world in the interim. Thus, by the early 1970s, the anticommunism that motivated the flight was no longer included in analeptic retellings; such Cold War attitudes were no longer appropriately heroic traits for heroes (and readers) who had lived through the 1960s. No diegetic explanations were given for this (or any other) deviation from the original

version; each version is meant to supersede all previous renditions, and becomes the underpinning for the concurrent textual reality. Certain story elements remain relatively constant in all (re)tellings: the names of the four teammates; exposure to radiation resulting from space travel; fundamental tension between the Thing and Mr. Fantastic. But each version has its own textual flavor, resulting in textual deviations, ranging from the resolution of anachronisms within the storyline; to artistic and dramatic alterations based on the shifting stylistic norms of the medium and/or the artistic inclinations of the current writer, artist, and editor; to the increased quality of paper and colored ink used in the mass production of comic books. Each retelling seems an attempt to produce a new ideal text, one that is not bound by the precedence of the historical series of texts that have preceded it. This plasticity of the superhero *fabula* renders it transhistorical; each textual version of it clothes the tale with the apparel of shifting trends, changing reader demographics and expectations, and historical contexts. To what extent, then, can the Fantastic Four's anticommunism be said to exist, or to ever have existed? The question can be raised another way: what is the relative role of the *textual* and *narrative* memories of the readers of serial publications with continuing characters? In my textual memory, not only does the Four's jingoistic and anachronistic patriotism remain; so too do several other discarded elements: the early rudimentary characterizations; the Thing's lump-like exterior, soon to evolve into an almost teddy-bearish orange rock sculpture, but in 1961 still monstrous and decidedly *not* cute; the stilted dialogue ("Fool! Did you not see me in time?"). As text, these events clearly *are*; as story elements, however, their ontological status is dependent upon the decisions of the current producers of each new textual appearance of the super team, and the corporate editorial frameworks within which they are required to operate.

This perpetual state of intertextual discontinuity is one of the major catalysts of what Henry Jenkins has characterized as a paradigm shift within contemporary superhero fiction from *continuity* to *multiplicity*:

Today, comics have entered a period when principles of multiplicity are felt at least as powerfully as those of continuity. Under this new system, Readers may consume multiple versions of the same franchise, each with different conceptions of the character, different understandings of their relationships with the secondary figures, different moral perspectives, exploring different moments in their lives, and so forth. ("Just Men in Tights" 20–21)

While the paradigm of continuity involves a never-ending battle to render textual inconsistencies, alternatives, and recursions into a coherent whole, multiplicity is characterized by the coexistence of divergent and, at least by the standards of continuity, incompatible *fabula*. Instead of a single, overarching continuity, several divergent, and often contradictory, continuities co-exist. This liberates new texts from engaging in the impossible task of consolidating all the disparate textual data that has accumulated around specific characters, and instead allows for variant versions to be published that establish their own provisional and delimited intertextual continuities. Each of these establishes and operates under its own continuity; there is no longer any perceived need to have all versions of a character conform to each other in terms of logical consistency and coherence.

This is the approach of Marvel's *Ultimate* series of titles, each of which establishes a new ongoing serial sequence, which provides re-imagined and updated versions of classic Marvel characters and story-events. For instance, the *Ultimate Fantastic Four* retells the familiar origin, includes many of the essential details, but transforms them into a contemporary setting, altering details to suit the composers' sense of the tastes of contemporary audiences. Thus, the four protagonists are now college-age prodigies; as befits this change, parents are introduced and generational tensions between them and their children established, making diegetically explicit the connection between acquisition of superpowers and adolescent self-discovery previously hidden in the presuppositions of the genre; anticommunism is replaced by a collaboration between corporate and government greed as the motivating factor behind the transforming experiment/accident; space exploration has been usurped in favor of inter-dimensional transportation as the scientific backdrop of said experiment.

This approach to retelling is fundamentally different from the transformative retcons of the past. Earlier revisions involved implicit and explicit alterations to the intertextual continuity, which, although fluid and malleable, was nevertheless considered singular and encompassing. The *Ultimate Fantastic Four* involves the conscious creation of a new version not simply of certain key episodes within the previously established continuity, but of the continuity itself. Thus, the *Ultimate Fantastic Four* functions not simply as a variant version within a continuity, but as a variant continuity, occupying the same bookshelf as the simultaneously published ongoing serial *Fantastic Four*, as well as several

self-contained mini-series that express their own takes on the familiar characters, story elements, and motifs. In addition, there are the texts derived from other media: a series of films that has currently completed two installments and three different animated television series. Each of these operates according to its own definition of what constitutes the Fantastic Four; and while there is influence and congruence between them, the imposing status of Most Real Fiction applies to none, or to all.

The *Ultimate Fantastic Four* seemingly represents the ultimate goal of revision: a neatly shaped end product triumphing over a messy *syuzhet*, a single ideal story over a multitudinous textual history. However, this vision of revision is itself embedded in its own paradox of infinite regression. While not a Borgian avatar of the tortoise, the *Ultimate Fantastic Four* can be described in terms of another classical Greek conundrum: Plato's self-critique of his own attempted solution to the challenges of maintaining continuity in the face of diversity, the Third Man Argument of the *Parmenides*. That which purports to be the summative and inclusive idea that resolves difference into identity is in fact merely and ineluctably another member of the series of which it presents itself to be the transcendent foundation. For an ultimate text can only exist by superseding all previous ones, by nullifying the anachronisms, redundancies, and discontinuities that have pervaded the plethora of previously published texts. Despite its attempt to resolve the inconsistencies of multiple texts into a smooth *fabula* continuity, ultimately (no pun intended), *Ultimate Fantastic Four* cannot escape its own textuality; it is just the most recent variant text in an open-ended series.

Essentially, both continuity and multiplicity recognize the textual condition as a fluid plurality of versions; however, while continuity views this condition as a problem to be solved, multiplicity sees it as an immutable fact that cannot be avoided. This mirrors some of the more radical notions of plurality among textual scholars such as John Bryant and his notion of the *fluid text*:

The multiplicity of versions is not a condition one can wish away, for authorial, editorial, and cultural revision is in the nature of literary phenomena; nor is it merely a "corruption" to "correct" (unless the variation happens to be an obvious error, like the word obvious earlier in this sentence). Rather, it is something to celebrate, study, and interpret. (4)

However, while release from the constraints of continuity would seem an obvious boon to creative expression, new limitations have emerged. Writer Grant Morrison sees a tendency to replace conformity to authenticity with a desire to produce “the definitive take”:

which tends to manifest itself as creators playing it safe by cherry-picking and re-packaging all the best and most popular elements of an already successful feature. It’s a commercial strip-mining kind of approach to a given property that seems to make a lot of sense until you realize it can really only work once before you find yourself in the awful position of having to make up stuff again. (Brady)

Morrison’s criticism illustrates how the loosening of the restrictions of orthodox continuity has involved the foregrounding of the status of the most famous superhero characters as corporate properties with great commercial potential, and how this foregrounding restricts the range of what is permissible. While Batman narratives, for example, are now composed that can freely choose to ignore the overdetermined and tangled influence of seventy years of continuity revisions, there remain restrictions based upon the need to protect the character’s increased status as corporate money-earner. To illustrate this point with a hypothetical (dare I say imaginary?) example: let us suppose that a comics creator has the desire to compose a Batman text that foregrounds notorious but traditionally subversive readings by portraying the character as explicitly homosexual. Under the sway of continuity, objections would be raised that such a portrayal would violate the established and canonical rendering of the character. The acceptance of multiplicity allows for such radical departures from convention, as no single story or group of stories needs to be incorporated into the framework of continuity. However, the objections to a queer Batman would now lose their veneer as purely based on the demands of story consistency, and reveal themselves to be corporate decisions that are based on a drive to protect the value of Batman as commodity.

The increasingly overt nature of corporately driven restrictions evident in post-continuity era superhero fiction has led to the development of a different narrative strategy: the creation of new characters that bear clear and intentional similarities to classic (and copyright-protected)

characters. This strategy allows for stories that can take advantage of the freedom from continuity while sidestepping the limits imposed by corporate interests that must protect the iconic value of their intellectual properties. Thus, post-continuity superhero narratives tend to fall within one of two broad categories: those that involve the re-imagining and revision of a pre-existing superhero such as Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns*; and those that introduce their own analogous characters and story events, as is the case in *Watchmen*. These two works are often linked together as contemporaneous landmark texts in the history of the superhero, and each remains the *locus classicus* of its distinct generic approach. In the one case, the familiarity of the character provides readers with an implicit textual undercurrent within and against which to interpret the version at hand; in the other, there is a far greater freedom to explore controversial and potentially unpopular themes more graphically.

To return to our hypothetical situation concerning a queer Batman: while any intimations concerning Batman's sexual orientation must be either unambiguously heterosexual or very ambiguously indeterminate as far as the current corporate ownership is concerned, one can imagine a character who is analogous to Batman for whom the range of possibilities is more expansive. This is in fact the case with Warren Ellis' The Midnighter, who is both an obvious "descendent" of Batman, as well as being openly homosexual (and in fact involved in an ongoing sexual relationship with an analogous counterpart of Superman, the character Apollo).⁴

While continuity and multiplicity offer different guidelines as to what is permissible and advisable in the production of new texts, they share a common disenchantment with the historical legacy of the superhero as incoherent text. The ruptures that were and are an inevitable byproduct of the superhero's medial, textual, and generic past are either selectively ignored by the provisional *fabula* of each new version, or else absconded by the hazy logic of oneiric temporality described by Eco. However, some contemporary superhero narratives have chosen an alternate approach, one in which discontinuities and irreconcilabilities are neither excised nor overlooked, but instead are explored and celebrated as generically unique and quintessential. These works both exemplify new strategies of revision, and are themselves meta-revisions that explore and challenge the processes which they employ. Klock has described this small but important group of narratives as *revisionary* (25); his readings draw heavily on the assertion that the model of revision they provide is best understood in terms of the diachronic misprision at the heart of Harold

Bloom's theory of intertextual influence (Klock 12–14). While Klock's comparison is valuable, the distinctive struggle of these revisionary superhero narratives to honor and respect discontinuity as creative expression resonates more directly with a different disciplinary approach concerning the complexities and ambiguities of textual revision: that of contemporary composition studies. These resonances will be identified and explored in the following chapter.

NOTES

1. A more thorough treatment of the textual scholarship and publication history of Conan Doyle's Holmes can be found in Christopher Redmond's *A Sherlock Holmes Handbook*, especially 51–68 and 224–225.
2. For more on the problems inherent in this historiographical approach, see Benjamin Woo's "An Age-Old Problem: Problematics of Comic Book Historiography."
3. For detailed histories of the Comics Code and its causes and effects, see David Hajdu's *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* and Amy Kiste Nyberg's *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*.
4. The Midnighter and Apollo originated in Ellis' *Stormwatch*, but are more well-known as members of the eponymous team featured in the ongoing series *The Authority*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl & Holquist, Michael Emerson. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "Avatars of the Tortoise." Borges, Jorge Luis. *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*. Ed. Donald A. & Irby, James E. Yates. New York: New Directions, 1964. 202–208.
- Brady, Matt. "Grant Morrison's Big-time Return to the DCU." 2 August 2004. *Newsarama.com*. 7 March 2010. <http://forum.newsarama.com/showthread.php?s=5e0f1f3c032b47c7ccc8e981fe4a648a&threadid=15990>.
- Brooker, Will. *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*. New York: Continuum, 2001.
- Bryant, John. *The Fluid Text: A Theory of Revision and Editing for Book and Screen*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002.

- Chatman, Seymour. *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Films*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Role of the Reader*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979.
- Ellis, John. *Visible Fictions: Cinema: Television: Video*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.
- G  nette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980.
- Hajdu, David. *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
- Hagedorn, Roger. "Doubtless to be Continued: A Brief History of Serial Narrative." *To Be Continued: Soap Operas Around the World*. Ed. Robert C. Allen. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1995. 27–48.
- Jenkins, Henry. "'Just Men in Tights': Rewriting Silver Age Comics in the Age of Multiplicity." *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*. Ed. Angela Ndalani. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009. 16–43.
- Klock, Geoff. *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*. London: Continuum, 2002.
- Lee, Stan. *Origins of Marvel Comics*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1974.
- Metz, Christian. *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*. Trans. Michael Taylor. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Nyberg, Amy Kiste. *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- Redmond, Christopher. *A Sherlock Holmes Handbook*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1993.
- Reynolds, Richard. *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992.
- Richardson, Brian. "Beyond Story and Discourse: Narrative Time in Postmodern and Nonmimetic Fiction." *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*. ed. Brian Richardson. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2002. 47–63.
- Sabin, Roger. *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*. London: Phaidon Press, 1996.
- Savage, William W. Jr. *Comic Books and America, 1945–1954*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990.
- Wandtke, Terrence R., ed. *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2007.
- Wolk, Douglas. *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*. Boston: Da Capo Press, 2007.
- Woo, Benjamin. "An Age-Old Problem: Problematics of Comic Book Historiography." *International Journal of Comic Art* 10.1 (Spring 2008): 268–279.



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-64758-6>

Revision and the Superhero Genre

Hyman, D.

2017, XI, 83 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-64758-6