

1. Why the World Needs Superheroes

Early, Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind– and so was created– Superman! Champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need! (*Action Comics #1* 1).

It seems that in the beginning, there was Superman. And then came a revolution in the medium of ‘comic’ books that embraced the superhero. And with that revolution came ... revision. Over the course of about seventy years, since *Action Comics #1* was published in 1937, the superhero clearly has been a vibrant presence in the United States and the world through not just comic books but a variety of other media forms as well. Superheroes now exist on an international stage in Hollywood blockbusters, internet fanfiction, Wal-Mart t-shirts, and even copyright law (all in unique ways and distributed worldwide). (Wandtke *Amazing Transforming Superhero!* 5)

Superman was and continues to be the ideal superhero in terms of establishing this character type and setting an example for how a real superhero should look like. He conquered the comic book world during the Second World War, an era which required heroes on all fronts. Ever since, superheroes have been part of our cultural world, soon expanding their presence from comic books to cultural products of various forms, amongst them merchandise as well as radio and TV shows. The last two decades can even be considered as a superhero heyday, especially when it comes to cinematic releases such as *X-Men* (2000), *Spider-Man* (2002), *Catwoman* (2004), *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Watchmen* (2009), *Kick-Ass* (2010), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), *Deadpool* (2016), *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018) and *Black Widow* (2021), to name but a few. Each year, superhero movies have been released, often trumping their predecessors in terms of critical and commercial success. Streaming platforms, too, have discovered the superhero narrative and expanded their series selections accordingly, including US American productions such as *Black Lightning* (2018-21), *The Umbrella Academy* (2019-), *WandaVision* (2021), *Jupiter's Legacy* (2021), and *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (2021).¹

The last 20 years, and especially the 2010s, thus were highly influenced by superhero stories, to the degree that one might even refer to them as the superhero era in motion pictures. Superman entered both his fictional world including Metropolis and our real world and cultural spheres at times of great sorrow. The Third Reich threatened the world and spread its terrors globally, with the Allied forces needing all their strength and power to defeat Hitler's regime. As Gordon observes, Superman joined their lines in so far as these “comics helped provide Americans with a unified vision of just what the war was about, the defense of a democracy” (5-6). From this early stage on, the superhero comic was more than just a colorful comic book for entertainment; it had a political agenda. It functioned as an anticipation of the defeat of Nazi Germany and the triumph of the United States, represented by its ideal – though alien – citizen Clark Kent alias Superman. He vanquished numerous villains in lieu of the Nazis and thus visualized that the Allies' victory was only a matter of time.

Superman's success resulted in superhero comics generally following similar structures. Even during comparatively peaceful times, superheroes have always had a political function. They do not just exist to entertain and for commercial success, although these are important

¹ This list would be even considerably longer if global productions, including cinema, TV and streaming formats, animation and audio shows were considered.

factors: “[S]uperheroes are a commodity to be exploited for profit” (Duncan, Smith and Levitz 224). The recent rise of the superhero in many ways reflects the notion that people feel lost and insecure and are looking for someone to comfort them, to fight for the status quo during times of high-paced change, to guide them through this world and even explain it at times. This status quo is not worth preserving for everybody, however. Superheroes defend a world which is good and just for them from their respective perspective. People who suffer discrimination, persecution or injustice might feel quite different about the status quo. The comic, however, shares the superhero’s perspective, which mostly matches the perspective of those in power, i.e., mostly male, white, abled, and comparatively well-to-do. Superheroes do not judge on their own whether the status quo is actually worth preserving, so that views about how this world might be improved beyond this status quo, e.g., in terms of equal rights, human rights or democratic values, have little to no relevance. It is those in power who decide which status quo is worth preserving, thereby meeting predominantly their needs instead of shifting their perspective to the suppressed and excluded.

Superhero narratives remain true to their political and comforting function during times of societal change. Just like their pioneers, especially from the Silver Age, they address political and societal topics, including the Cold War and patriotism in general. Moreover, the tendency to include topics such as racial equality, the empowerment of women or inclusion of the othered in society has increased from the 1960s onwards. Although they do not necessarily engage directly in any movements, such as Black Lives Matter or MeToo, current superhero movies address similar content or messages in their own ways. *Black Panther*, for instance, challenges negative tropes of Africa, still present and active forms of racism as well as various ways of fighting for equality. Examples such as *Wonder Woman* and *Black Widow*, in turn, aim at showing that women are just as strong and powerful as men, if not even stronger in many ways.² Others address topics such as the ups and downs of teenage life and the constant need to prove oneself (e.g., the *Spider-Man* movies with a teenage Peter Parker or *Kick-Ass*), the struggles of family life, especially in a superpowered family (e.g., *Jupiter’s Legacy*, *The Umbrella Academy* and the *Fantastic Four* movies), or the constant inner fight between what is right and what is evil, even in day-to-day life (e.g., *Jupiter’s Legacy*, *The Dark Knight* and *Watchmen*). All of these superhero narratives include both, the fight of the superhero against a supervillain, thereby saving the world, and challenge current events, societal topics and political issues. This constitutes something that is not at all common for or inherent in popcultural products. Especially the focus on the supervillains, how they contribute to this political criticism and what functions they fulfill is of importance for the narrative. This is why this project focuses on the supervillain rather than the superhero although their interwoven relationship influences the characterizations and functions of both.

The Superhero Comic of the Silver Age

One reason for the genre’s critical orientation lies in its comic book tradition. Most of the characters and stories stem from one specific era, the 1960s’ so-called Silver Age of the superhero comic. During this decade full of political events and sweeping changes, including the Civil Rights Movement, the rise of science and technology and, most importantly, the Cold War, the superhero comic perfected its function as a popular cultural instrument of political and societal criticism. Although many restrictions, such as the Comics Code’s self-censorship

² The psychologist and feminist William Moulton Marston invented Wonder Woman in 1941 to provide young girls with an identification figure that shows them that women are not inferior to men. He tried to convey positive attributes such as strength, self-reliance and esteem for human life as predominantly female ones. See: Steinem (“Wonder Woman”), Robbins (“The Great Women Superheroes”) and Darowski ed (*The Ages of Wonder Woman*).

of the comic industry, prohibited the comic to address political topics directly and explicitly, especially the superhero comic proved its capacity for doing so indirectly and implicitly, yet quite clearly.³ Without the censor board's approval, the chances of selling comics were practically non-existent, since newsstands would not offer those at all. The superhero, however, experienced a revival which would pave the way for the entire genre, expanding its commercial success to all kinds of cultural products beyond the comic books.

This renewal or "revision," as Wandtke calls it, is currently undergoing a second iteration which includes both previously successful superheroes as well as many new superpowered characters who now conquer our screens. Famous examples are Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, Thor, the X-Men, Black Panther and Black Widow. They all stem from the Silver Age and were as popular then as they are in their recent cinematic adaptations. Whereas current versions vary depending on the respective director as well as actors, the comic originals were, at least for a specific period, created by the same people, especially the character Spider-Man. The comic version was one of the most popular and successful superhero comics of the Silver Age and was created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko.⁴ This dream team of comic artists changed only when Ditko surprisingly left the company and Lee rose through the ranks and henceforth functioned as editor-in-chief (Comtois 96).⁵ Lee and Ditko established the foundation of this character, which evolved but never changed too much, as it had been successful for many years. The newer cinematic adaptations, however, change with their respective directors (Sam Raimi, Marc Webb and Jon Watts) and actors (Tobey Maguire, Andrew Garfield and Tom Holland), thus always highlighting another point of Spider-Man's life or a different character trait. While these movies illustrate the complex and versatile character of Spider-Man, the comic established these and paved the way for similar interesting characters to come who deviated greatly from their predecessors of the previous era, the Golden Age of superhero comics.

This era began with the appearance of the first superhero Superman in 1937. It lasted only a few years, roughly until the end of the Second World War. The war itself contributed to both the initiation as well as the decrease of comics in its wake, as many creators served in the war and due to the overall shortage of paper. Moreover, after the war ended, the erstwhile need for superheroes seemed satisfied, at least momentarily. When the Comics Code was established in the late 1950s as direct reply to Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) which declared comics in general as harmful for children, most comic publications ended rather abruptly and only three great superheroes— Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman— survived. All three belonged to the then dominant DC publishing house. DC, short for Detective Comics, indicates its initial orientation. Nonetheless, DC evolved into one of the

³ The comic industry inflicted this censorship itself to prevent a governmental one. Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) ascribed negative influence on children to comics in general and was the cause for societal debates which caught the government's attention. The Comics Code was strictly against the inherent display of violence, naked bodies or inappropriate behavior, since this was not considered suitable for children. Other genres, such as the horror comic or erotic comics, almost vanished due to this censorship, since they had but little chance of receiving the approval (Kukkonen, *Studying Comics* 111). For more detail, see Chapter 2.

⁴ Jack Kirby, star artist at Marvel during the 1960s, did not actually contribute to the *Spider-Man* comics except in creating the first two covers. Although he claimed to have invented the character in the first place, together with Joe Simon, Lee presented himself and Ditko as creators (Alan Smith "Jack Kirby: The Not-So-Secret Identity of the Thing" 192). Kirby did not participate in this comic series after that, while remaining the main artist for many other comics, such as *The Fantastic Four*, *Hulk*, *Thor* and *The X-Men*.

⁵ While there have been many rumors why Ditko left Marvel, the actual circumstances remain unclear. DeFalco assumes that the bad relationship between Ditko and Lee functioned as main cause, however, none of the two ever confirmed that view publicly (DeFalco "1960s" 117).

biggest (superhero) comic publishers worldwide, only matched by Marvel, which started the Silver Age revival and has challenged its competitor ever since. DC, however, needed too much time to realize that their former superheroes did not match the times any more. They kept on producing the same narratives about the always smiling and perfect superhero defeating constantly tough supervillains, too long ignoring that the type on which these supervillains were based, namely Hitler, had begun to fade from the target readership's minds. Reading formulaic retellings did not seem to meet the reader's expectations any longer. Contrary to DC, Marvel established vulnerable and weaker superheroes, struggling with responsibility as well as daily-life problems, thereby providing them with more depth and humanity. The Fantastic Four, for instance, are a superhero team of four people, seemingly randomly connected, who act as a substitute family. This refers directly to the trope of the post-war family ideal as well as the Cold War family ideal which has suffused popular culture until today, since "the family was the bulwark of American values" (Costello *Secret Identity Crisis* 51). This family encounters many threats, external as well as internal, since all members have their own problems and difficulties to deal with. Ben Grimm, alias the Thing, for instance, possesses an extremely peppery temper and tends to lose it over small matters. This is a rather dangerous feature, as he is one of the strongest persons on earth after his mutation into the rock-like Thing. He thus resembles the Hulk, who appeared several months later. The Thing, moreover, shows weak character traits such as a lack of confidence and immense shyness when it comes to girls and women. This emotional vulnerability is one important part of the new superhero formula which Marvel, under the creative leadership of Stan Lee, established. Thereby, the publishing house initiated a revolution in the superhero comic genre.

The before mentioned Hulk is another very fascinating and contradictory character who embodies many aspects of this new superhero formula. He first appeared in 1962 as Doctor Robert Bruce Banner who suffered extreme radiation while saving an innocent boy.⁶ This incident caused Banner's transformation to the Hulk, a at first grayish and later greenish monster reminding of Dr. Jekyll's Mr. Hyde. Whereas Banner is introduced as selfless, patriotic and undoubtedly good scientist, the Hulk functions as extreme counterpart: aggressive, not intelligent, short-sighted and egocentric. Banner seems incapable of controlling this inner monster of his which leads him to leave society behind. He tries to conceal the Hulk and his explosive emotions by spending the nights in a cave, blocked with an enormous stone to prevent the immensely strong Hulk to free himself and go rampage. In the day, the Hulk appears dormant, and Banner is in charge. He tries to disconnect from his emotions to not awaken the Hulk by accident as he also reacts to rage and anger, thereby giving "the Incredible Hulk syndrome" its name (Sayers 89). Banner's scientific mind works on a solution to this problem, yet in vain. He will never manage to get rid of this new version of himself and fails in controlling it. Instead, he realizes that he is the Hulk and needs to integrate him with all his traits into his Banner-personality. "Not without internal conflict (to put it mildly), the green goliath and the puny scientist co-exist" (Alaniz "'The Monster's Analyst' and the 'Binomial Self'" 74). Although the Hulk is strong enough to crush any enemy, he is too dangerous and unpredictable to consider him as superhero fighting supervillains. Applying this to the Cold War allegory, the Hulk represents nuclear weaponry which is strong enough to defeat the communists and the Soviet Union, yet which also poses a threat to democracy and the United States of America themselves. He represents a brinkmanship and therefore nourishes the societal and political debate about the development and usage of atomic bombs.

Banner, though, does not fight alone. His loyal sidekick Rick Jones, the boy who was saved by Banner, dedicates his life to supporting Banner. Not the Hulk. Usually, sidekicks fight side by

⁶ The Hulk appeared in *The Fantastic Four #25* (1964) and was mistakenly introduced as Bob Banner (4). Afterwards, he was renamed Robert Bruce Banner to make up for this.

side by superheroes. Breaking with this tradition, Rick choses to fight alongside humanity and therefore fights for Banner, even if this means to fight the Hulk.⁷ This duo shows that Marvel rather focuses on the human part than the super part which makes the most important aspect of the Marvel superhero formula of the Silver Age: Superheroes are human beings with special abilities and not superior beings freed of human emotions and weaknesses. Gentle also considers these special abilities as “beneficial to the individual who possess them” without questioning their human nature (15). The Silver Age formula differs from the Golden Age formula as “[they] must alter to follow suit, injecting new, unpredictable , and more challenging characterizations that keep the readers engaged” (Ndalianis 10). Bainbridge links this new orientation to the difference in role models for Marvel and DC: Whereas DC superheroes “represent a condensation of the heroic archetypes”, Marvel “looked to other sources (... such as) horror literature (... or) radio and television series” (69-70). Thus, Marvel superheroes rather follow human characters than divine ones, which is especially tangible in characters such as Spider-Man or the Human Torch.

The superhero is not a phenomenon solely linked to comics. This character type appears in various literary forms, among them comics and movies but also TV shows and commercials. The usual definition is limited to one aspect: “some supernatural capacity within a world of everyday physics” (Nakassis 38). Although I, as many superhero scholars, disagree with this view, since there are also superheroes without special powers per se, e.g., Batman, the possession of superpowers seems inseparable from the superhero formula. The superhero needs some special abilities to fulfill their task, namely fighting evil and saving humanity. There are, however, certain rules to follow while defeating the supervillain which define the superhero formula. Among them are the “no-kill rule” (Arnaudo 79), the non-dying rule or rather “death and rebirth” (Bahlmann 47) and acting “from the borders (...) [which] may be urban (...), or national (...), or even celestial” (Gaine 48). These three aspects rather define the superhero formula than specific characteristics that scholars try to ascribe to them. Coogan offered a concise definition which many others follow, like Bahlmann (*The Mythology of the Superhero* 25) or Gavalier (*Superhero Comics* 1), yet which limits the superhero to some specific aspects, ignoring those who deviate as well as their behavior. Batman, for instance, is one of the most popular and well-known superheroes of all times. However, he does not comply with Coogan’s definition since he does not possess any superhuman powers. Black Panther is in the beginning neither selfless nor oriented towards a pro-social mission. The Fantastic Four do not hide their private identities and wear uniforms rather than costumes. Although Gavalier also takes thoughts like these into consideration when quoting Coogan in *Superhero Comics*, he explains these deviations with evolution and development over time, ignoring the fact that Batman functioned as one of the first superheroes while at the same time broadening the character formula. Therefore, I argue that the superhero formula consists of a more complex and versatile character concepts than a short list of character traits. It includes behavior and social engagements as well as their overall position inside (or rather at the margins of) society, how the deal with that and what they chose to do with their special position of having powers of some sort.

Marvel engages with this formula in not only expanding it even further, but the comic publisher also treats it quite differently, for example compared to DC. Whereas superheroes still have superpowers in a way that they deviate from regular people, this deviation is only of import when it comes to interpersonal relations. The human part gains relevance while the super part becomes trivial. This new way of looking at superheroes, of including them into

⁷ This fight for humanity and reason is a very interesting aspect of the Hulk comics which I focus on in my paper “You be the hero, I remain the sidekick?: Rick Jones’ Quest to Save Humanity” (*The Human in Superhuman: The Power of the Sidekick in Popular Culture*. Eds. Sandra Eckard and Alex Romagnoli. Lexington Books, 2023, pp. 153-69.)

society or rather focusing on the impossibility of doing so, of highlighting the weaknesses rather than the strengths, marks the new superhero formula which many scholars still do not differentiate from the superhero definition à la Coogan. It is not only important that Spider-Man is actually a weak and shy teenager; it is important how this circumstance influences his behavior as superhero. Miczo also stresses that it is not the super part that defines the superhero, but the “superhero’s character (...) [as] a central concern of ethics” (2). He observes that supervillains have special powers as well and do not deviate from superheroes in many ways, except in their way of using their powers. This remark already brings to the fore why the relationship between superhero and supervillain is such an interesting one and why both character formulas depend on each other. However, it is not only the goodness that makes a difference but also how this goodness is conveyed. Captain America, for example, one prime representative of the Golden Age superhero formula, does not hesitate to risk his life for others as he has no doubts or fears. Spider-Man is as good as Cap in terms of goodness as opposed to evil, yet he is troubled with fears and worries. Still, he enters the fight though being frightened and maybe even inferior to his evil opponent. This circumstance increases his goodness and bravery although Cap appears much braver and stronger. The characterization deviates as does the formula from Golden to Silver Age and this change is responsible for the immense success of Marvel superhero comics in the 1960s.

The evolution of the superhero character changes the entire genre and coins the Silver Age of superhero comics. Moreover, it also has a strong effect on the film industry of the 21st century since the last 20 years of cinema deal with a rise of superhero movies. These movies predominantly fall back on Silver Age superheroes and thereby change the movie industry accordingly. Scholars do not seem to be too interested in the comic versions; however, this cinematic evolution began a flood of publications concerned with this superhero rise in the movies. *The Superhero Multiverse* attempts to look at the broad field of superhero movies all at once, even including other medial formats such as video games, mangas and series published on streaming platforms like Netflix. While this collection of papers occupies various angles and thereby showcases the versatile world of superheroes, it fails to grasp what a superhero and in extension a superhero narrative is. *Marvelous Rise of Superheroes in Cinema* as well as *The 21st Century Superhero* rather focus on the superhero as character and point out that the definition problem remains unsolved. Tuna Tetik (*Marvelous Rise of Superheroes in Cinema*, 2022) tries to get to the root by comparing the supervillain with the anti-hero and monstrous figures in general, yet coming to the conclusion that this differentiation remains problematic. Most other scholars, such as Terence McSweeney (*The Contemporary Superhero Film*, 2020) and Felix Brinker (*Superhero Blockbusters*, 2022), take the genre of the superhero film and thereby the superhero as character for granted without questioning them any further. Other aspects, among them seriality, gender and ethnicity, move to the center of attention. This dealing with superhero narratives in academia brings to the fore that the concept of the superhero is treated as common knowledge that needs no further examination. I strongly disagree. The superhero formula in academia remains a broad and vague concept whose influence on the genre of the superhero comic, and in extension the superhero film, requires detailed analyses to better understand it. Furthermore, the concept of the supervillain remains even more in the dark in academia which I cannot fathom at all, considering the vast and serious impact supervillains have on the superhero, the narrative and even on the reader. Especially Marvel used this potential in both characters by changing their formulas and ascribing to them versatile but powerful attributes in order to exploit the genre’s influence in political, social and societal affairs.⁸

⁸ For more information about the superhero film, see: *The Superhero Multiverse* (Lorna Piatti-Farnell, 2022) or *The 21st Century Superhero* (Richard J. Gray II and Betty Kaklamanidou, 2011).