WORLDS WILL LIVE, WORLDS WILL DIE: MYTH, METATEXT, CONTINUITY AND CATACLYSM IN DC COMICS’ CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS

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ABSTRACT

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In 1985-86, DC Comics launched an extensive campaign to revamp and revise its most important superhero characters for a new era. In many cases, this involved streamlining, retouching, or completely overhauling the characters’ fictional back-stories, while similarly renovating the shared fictional context in which their adventures take place, “the DC Universe.” To accomplish this act of revisionist history, DC resorted to a text-based performative gesture, *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. This thesis analyzes the impact of this singular text and the phenomena it inspired on the comic-book industry and the DC Comics fan community. The first chapter explains the nature and importance of the convention of “continuity” (i.e., intertextual diegetic storytelling, unfolding progressively over time) in superhero comics, identifying superhero fans’ attachment to continuity as a source of reading pleasure and cultural expressivity as the key factor informing the creation of the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* text. The second chapter consists of an eschatological reading of the text itself, in which it is argued that *Crisis on Infinite Earths* combines self-reflexive metafiction with the ideologically inflected symbolic language of apocalypse myth to provide DC Comics fans with a textual "rite of transition," to win their acceptance for DC’s mid-1980s project of self-rehistoricization and renewal. The third chapter enumerates developments in the comic-book industry and superhero fandom in the past twenty years that are attributable to the influence of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. My final assessment is that although *Crisis on Infinite Earths* failed in some respects to have its intended effect on “the DC Universe” and its readership, it did serve as a powerful mythological mediator in the introduction of new ways for superhero stories to interact with their own fictional and historical contexts and with their audience, and it fostered new generic expectations and reading practices among the superhero fan community.
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Reaching back into my academic past, I wish to thank Profs. John Moore and Michael Anesko, who guided me through my last attempt at addressing superhero comics in a thesis format when I was an undergraduate, and Dr. Patrick Trimble, whose teachings convinced me that a postgraduate degree in popular culture studies was worth pursuing.

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DEDICATION

This work is respectfully dedicated...

...to the good people of the Comic Geek Speak Forum, for their interest and encouragement;

...to the countless trillions of fictional beings whose very lives were rendered null and void by the cataclysmic events herein described (lest we forget...);

...and, of course, to my ever-loving parents, Jim and Janice, who are the “secret origin” of everything I am and do, regardless of what parallel universe I’m in.
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INTRODUCTION

Crisis, of course, entails both chaos and possibility....

- Richard E. Lee

The Life and Times of Cultural Studies

Worlds will live.
Worlds will die.
And the DC Universe will never be the same!

- slogan featured in DC Comics house ads for Crisis on Infinite Earths

At the age of fourteen, when I, an avid reader and collector of Marvel Comics with three years’ experience, decided to expand my horizons and familiarize myself with the superhero characters of the DC Comics line, I first learned of a comic series called Crisis on Infinite Earths. The title was repeatedly mentioned in the text of Who’s Who: The Definitive Directory of the DC Universe, a modestly exhaustive multivolume reference work that was published in the mid-1980s by DC Comics as a sort of informal reader’s guide to the hundreds of heroes, villains, and supporting characters that had appeared in DC publications over the years. I had bought a few back issues of Who’s Who, hoping that reading them would help me in my bid to “break in” to DC Comics fandom, and as I skimmed over the dossier-style entries--which included summaries of the fictional “life stories” of various characters, accumulated over several decades’ worth of comic-book history--I was struck by the number and diversity of characters whose fictional lives had been drastically affected “due to the recent events of the so-called crisis on infinite earths.” All types of character DC Comics had ever published, across an impossibly diverse range of genres--from cowboys to space rangers to private eyes to magicians to monsters to barbarians to garden-variety superheroes--were seemingly united in their vulnerability to the chaos sown by this mysterious and terrible event, this “crisis” in their midst. Many of them actually died (including a few major
cultural icons, such as the Flash and Supergirl, that even a DC Comics neophyte like myself had heard of), while a handful of new heroes and villains emerged to take their place. Other characters sustained crippling injuries or other radical changes to their long-established status quo. Still other characters, in the language of *Who’s Who*, had their personal histories “revised” such that they became entirely different characters or, most bewildering of all, simply “never existed” to begin with, not even in the fictional world wherein their adventures had erstwhile taken place.

Despite my total ignorance of the true nature of this ubiquitous “crisis on infinite earths,” I was awestruck. Simply reading these crude, vague verbal allusions to it was enough to give me the impression that I had stumbled onto a narrative construct of such magnitude, of such tremendous intertextuality and metaphysical implications (superheroes not only dying, but retroactively, permanently blinking out of existence? unthinkable!), that it challenged every simplistic, straightforward notion of superhero comics and their storytelling possibilities that I harbored in my naïve young mind.

As time passed, my understanding of DC Comics and of the superhero genre in general became more sophisticated. I learned, for instance, that the “crisis on infinite earths” I had read about actually referred to a self-contained twelve-issue comic-book miniseries published by DC Comics in the mid-1980s, and that this series had featured appearances by virtually every character, setting, and concept that had ever played a significant role in DC Comics, in order to simultaneously celebrate and (somewhat paradoxically) nullify and reconstruct the rich body of superhero lore that was the company’s heritage. I also learned that the aforementioned *Who’s Who* directory, which had been published concurrently with the *Crisis* series, existed specifically to serve as a “scorecard” to help readers make sense of the latter’s enormous cast of characters. Finally, I found copies of all twelve issues of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and read them for myself. My initial intrigue with the series did not diminish with familiarity; if anything, upon reading the story I was even more impressed with the sheer creative ambition of it, both in its overwhelmingly broad, epic scale and in the radical (disturbingly so, in the eyes of many longtime DC Comics fans) changes it wrought in a genre that had become infamous for conservatism, nostalgia, and a crippling
dependence on tired narrative formulae. It is the persistent sense of awe, the wide-eyed wonder and horror that this iconoclastic text still inspires in me now, years after first reading it--plus the knowledge, gleaned through personal experience, that my sentiments on the subject are very widely shared throughout the comics fan community--that first led me to believe that *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is a text worthy of deeper academic study, a conviction that I hope to validate in the pages that follow.

The story of how *Crisis on Infinite Earths* came to be has been frequently retold in various comic-book fan publications (especially in recent months, since at the time of this writing DC Comics is celebrating the 20th anniversary of the series’ publication), to the extent that the series itself has taken on a “legendary” stature in fan circles almost on a par with that of the iconic superhero figures that appear in it. In 1985-86, to celebrate its 50th anniversary of operations, DC Comics--the comic-book company famous as the trademark-holder and publisher of such cultural icons as Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, the Flash, and the Justice League of America, and as the corporate entity that claims the most credit for originating the very concept of the superhero--launched an extensive campaign to revamp and revise its most important superhero characters for a new era. In many cases, this involved streamlining, retouching, or completely overhauling the characters’ fictional back-stories. These character histories encompassed decades’ worth of dated, byzantine, occasionally self-contradictory storytelling, and the editorial powers-that-be at DC Comics had come to regard these histories as convoluted, inconsistent, inaccessible and/or intimidating to novice readers, and a general liability to the company’s future creative and financial successes.

This situation can be partially ascribed to the convention of “continuity” in superhero comics--the idea that every story told about a particular character becomes an indelible part of a historically established timeline of events for that character, to which future stories may make reference, but which no future story may ignore or contradict. This practice of establishing fixed, inviolable chronologies for superhero characters is thought by some to lend a certain dimension of “realism” to those characters’ fictional adventures by binding them, however loosely and
imperfectly, to classical unities of time and space, and it is a practice that is stolidly defended by many longtime superhero fans. The issue of continuity was compounded in the case of DC Comics, which had formed a tradition of combining the individual continuities of virtually every character it published into a single shared context, wherein a near-infinite range of different characters could “meet” in individual stories that then became a part of the continuities of all those characters involved. Thanks to this overarching, collective continuity, it became as if every superhero comic book ever published by DC Comics were but one chapter in a huge, sprawling, massively multicharacter saga taking place in a single fictional world (colloquially known as “the DC Universe”).

As this “universe” grew ever more inclusive, expansive, and complex over a period of decades, internal storytelling inconsistencies inevitably arose. To explain or amend these errors, the writers and artists at DC Comics opted to split the DC Universe into several different “parallel universes” of characters, each with its own distinct history and characteristics yet still capable of fostering interactions between its own characters and those of other “universes” under the DC Comics publishing aegis. In some cases these “universes” involved multiple versions of the same characters (e.g., one “universe” containing a World-War-II-era Superman and another containing a contemporary one, to explain how the character and his supporting cast could have been in existence since 1938 without aging). The resulting “multiverse” of superhero fiction boasted a certain richness and complexity that was appreciated by some devoted superhero fans, who cited the idea of shared context as one of several traits relating modern superhero comics to the pantheonic mythologies of old; more than one academic writer on superhero comics has been inclined to agree with this perspective. Nevertheless, however much the DC “multiverse” may have pleased some fans, to others the dense intertextuality and seeming redundancy of this storytelling framework appeared daunting and confusing, an obstacle to their potential enjoyment of DC Comics’ superhero publications.

Therefore, in 1985, the editorial powers at DC determined that it was necessary to jettison most of the accumulated superhero continuity that made up the DC Universe and to relaunch their
major characters’ back-stories afresh, in order to make them more appealing and accessible to a new generation of readers who might be unfamiliar with the characters’ long histories. The *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series was conceived as the vehicle for this process of renewal. The *Crisis* story itself centers around the numerous denizens of DC’s multiverse, heroes and villains alike, as they unite to wage a titanic struggle for survival: a demonic entity from beyond is systematically destroying the potentially infinite number of “parallel universes” in the multiverse (each of which contains its own version of “planet Earth,” defended by a distinct set of superhero characters; hence the “infinite Earths” mentioned in the title), and the super-beings must race against time to save the remaining handful of universes from oblivion. After a few hundred pages filled with angst, desperation, tableaux of cosmic destruction, and narrative embellishment that is as symbolic as it is complicated, the whole epic culminates in a battle royale at the Beginning of Time, wherein the entire established history of the DC Universe is drastically modified.

The major consequences of this chain of events, briefly stated, are as follows: 1.) the multiverse, with its innumerable parallel universes, was wiped out of existence and retroactively replaced by a single DC Universe with a unified history, essentially a reader-friendly gestalt of all the best elements of the various “infinite Earths” that preceded it; 2.) the great majority of DC Comics stories published 1935-1985 (especially those involving the now-nonexistent parallel universes) were rendered noncanonical, leaving the post-Crisis DC Universe as a creative *tabula rasa*, unencumbered (albeit temporarily) by the demands of past continuity; 3.) any DC characters deemed redundant, illogical, anachronistic, or just “lame” by the series’ creators and editors simply ceased to exist, their life histories conveniently excluded from the newly reformed timeline; and 4.) no DC characters (save a very few) retained any memory of the outmoded fictional reality they had inhabited prior to the “revisions” instituted by *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. As mentioned above, the *Crisis* series served as a showcase and a clearinghouse for as many DC Comics characters and concepts as could be fit into twelve issues, making it at once an affirmation and a negation of DC’s publishing legacy. For those characters whose lot was to die and/or to be erased from history, it
provided a final farewell, while providing an introduction to new readers for those characters destined to live and be marketed another day.

Admittedly, much of the foregoing discussion must seem fairly superficial from a cultural studies standpoint. It is easy enough for the uninitiated to dismiss the “cataclysmic” events of Crisis on Infinite Earths as facile, transparent corporate manipulation of textual material. What is less easy to dismiss, however, is the great commercial success of the series, the far-reaching influence it has had on the storytelling conventions of the superhero genre, and the fascination it continues to hold for mainstream comics fandom even twenty years after the fact. At the time of its release, Crisis on Infinite Earths sold very well, as did all of its many “tie-ins” or “crossovers”—special issues of DC’s regular, ongoing superhero comic books that depicted the events of Crisis from the point of view of the title character or characters. As comics historians Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs (rather ambivalently) report:

[Crisis] opened huge.... It won a fan award as ‘Best Limited Series’ before it was halfway done. And it stayed huge, even when the sheer, preposterous complexity— the charting of the pasts and futures of dozens of characters, the folding together of parallel Earths, the mountains of exposition, the endless fight scenes—made it impossible to understand. 3

Today, the series is available in several “high-end,” expensive deluxe collected editions and has inspired such auxiliary merchandise as a prose novelization, a collection of posters, and even a line of action figures, all of which are consistently strong sellers, while first-run back issues of the series remain in demand on the collectibles market. Dick Giordano, editor-in-chief of DC Comics at the time Crisis on Infinite Earths was published, accounts for the profitability and sustained fan interest that the series has enjoyed (compared to later series, published by DC and its competitors, that were similar to Crisis but were not as popular with readers) in terms of its daring innovativeness and the relative permanence of its influence on the DC Universe, describing the series as “a story that needed telling—a story that made permanent, irreversible changes in a superhero universe... a story that made a difference!” 4 For a fan perspective, we turn to amateur Crisis scholar and annotator Jonathan Woodward, who echoes Giordano’s thoughts on the “irreversibility” of the series: “To
this day, a serious discussion of DC Comics is going to be peppered with [the terms] ‘pre-Crisis’ and ‘post-Crisis.’ You can't get away from it, you can't ignore it, and you can't pretend it didn't happen. It will matter forever.”

True to Woodward’s words, Crisis on Infinite Earths has proved to be such a powerful periodizing moment that even published and/or academic “serious discussions” of DC Comics—or of the history and fandom of superhero comics in general, for that matter—can scarcely avoid giving the series at least a passing mention. Unfortunately, it would seem that a “passing mention” is all that most such studies are willing to devote to Crisis, their apparent inclination being to reduce the series to a mere functionary footnote (albeit an annoyingly inevitable one) in the developmental history of the superhero genre. Preeminent comics historian Les Daniels, for instance, writes Crisis off as a “time-warp gimmick obliging all DC characters to start their adventures from scratch.”

Geoff Klock, one of very few scholars to give any extended consideration to Crisis—a six-page section, rather derogatorily designated “Chapter Zero,” in his book How to Read Superhero Comics and Why—s is equally dismissive: “Crisis was in many ways merely a marketing gimmick, forcing readers to buy all twelve issues to understand the changes being imposed on all their favorite characters and the universe they inhabited.” Even the principal author and architect of Crisis—writer Marv Wolfman, who speaks fondly of his contribution to Crisis as “not just a job, but a calling”—is inclined to de-emphasize his magnum opus, expressing surprise at its place in the canonical hierarchy of fan-favorite texts:

I had always thought Crisis on Infinite Earths would just be a catalyst to the re-starting of the DCU and therefore on its own would be considered a hopefully good comic that allowed so much to spring from it. I thought everyone would continue to be talking about the changes that came out of it but I never expected people would be talking about the comic itself.

Such assessments, which seem unwilling or unable to grant Crisis on Infinite Earths credit for being much more than a testament to corporate venality and/or an arbitrary starting point for an
era of more “artistically significant” creative output that came after it, are distressingly incongruent with the obvious devotion expressed by an entire generation of fans (myself included) to the Crisis text itself, as a compelling and integral part of, rather than a shoddy excuse for, the radical changes it brought about in the DC Comics milieu and in the fans’ felt relationship thereto. I would suggest that the crucial fallacy in such reductive views is that they lose sight of the fact that Crisis--prior to being a historical transition, a vehicle, a catalyst, a conceit, a commodity, or most disparaging of all, a “gimmick”--was a story, and its success in fulfilling whatever commercial or technical functions it may have had was wholly secondary to and dependent on its success as a story (i.e., the extent to which it had an emotional/intellectual impact on and was embraced by superhero fans). To reinvoke Dick Giordano’s words, it was “a story that needed telling.”

Which begs the question: given my proposition that Crisis on Infinite Earths is best understood and analyzed as a story, anterior to any consideration of its functions or effects beyond the sphere of simple audience reception, what makes it a story that “needed telling”? In asking this, I am not rehashing the question of why DC Comics opted to “reboot” the fictional reality of the DC Universe; DC’s stated reasons for this (to streamline their continuity, to thin out their character catalogue, to accommodate new readers, etc.) are well-documented, in the preceding pages and elsewhere. Rather, I am seeking to understand why DC chose the specifically narrative means they did (i.e., the publication of Crisis on Infinite Earths) to put this “reboot” into practice. A common theme that subtly shows forth in many descriptions of the Crisis series, even those that are critical or dismissive in tone, is the assumption that Crisis was an essential and indispensable step in effecting the changes made to the DC Universe, that those changes would have been impracticable without it. Wolfman, for instance, refers to Crisis as a comic that “allowed so much to spring from it”; similarly, in the single sentence she devotes to the subject, Mila Bongco recounts how “DC published the Crisis on Infinite Earths series which allowed them to re-organize and simplify the DC world with its myriad of characters and universes for new readers.”

The use of the word “allow” in these quotations is of key interest: in what sense did Crisis on Infinite Earths “allow” DC Comics to perform their desired revisions, and why would DC have
needed to be “allowed” to perform them? After all, the DC Universe and its characters are not only fictional, but they are, strictly speaking, the legal property of DC Comics. If the company had wanted to blithely, summarily abandon the past as if it had never been--to terminate the old DC Universe continuity, wrapping up old storylines and starting over from scratch, without the textual mediation of a “gimmick” like Crisis on Infinite Earths to mark the transition from old fictional reality to new--the option was certainly open to them. Instead, DC opted to provide a diegetic, “story-based” (to borrow a comics industry term) explanation for the changes being made. In the company’s own words (as quoted from a “compendium” of background information included with the most recent collected edition of Crisis), “It was one thing to create a timeline or a laundry list of characters in need of sprucing up or outright killing, but there had to be a story to make it all worthwhile and satisfying for fans.”

The bulk of this thesis will be devoted to finding answers for two broad, interrelated questions: 1.) What is it about comic-book fandom and/or the superhero genre that made DC Comics feel obligated to justify its corporate practices in story form through the publication of Crisis on Infinite Earths; and 2.) what is the specific nature of the tangible influence that Crisis has had, as story and as “gimmick,” on the comics industry and its fans? The most obvious, and crassly cynical, answer to the first question involves commercial exploitation: DC Comics published the Crisis series because they felt confident that many superhero fans, even a few who did not ordinarily read DC Comics, would buy it, thereby garnering profits and potential new readers for the company while publicizing the newly revised DC Universe, all at the same time. It would be naïve not to acknowledge this, but I also feel that there is a deeper, culturally specific raison d’être for Crisis on Infinite Earths.

In order to understand what this is, it is first necessary to achieve a deeper understanding of the concept of continuity, which forms, according to Richard Reynolds, “the most crucial aspect of enjoyment for the committed [comic-book] fans.” Therefore, the first chapter of this thesis will recount the history and origins of narrative continuity in superhero comics, describe its functions and relative importance in the eyes of superhero fans, and present a few existing academic
theoretical perspectives on it. Most importantly, in the first chapter I will argue that continuity and the accumulated/commodified body of knowledge it entails plays a central role in the construction of community among the widely dispersed superhero fan population; that continuity forms the backbone for what is essentially a form of American cultural mythology; and that these hypothetical functions of continuity directly informed the conception of the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series moreso than any other consideration.

The discussion of continuity in the first chapter will lead directly to one of my most significant theoretical assertions in the second chapter: if superhero comics are, in effect, a modern American version of mythology, then *Crisis on Infinite Earths* serves as an apocalypse myth--a legend of death and renewal, or in Craft’s terms, “a death ritual performed within the space of the fiction network”--within that mythology, much as the story of Ragnarok was in the mythology of the ancient Norsemen. The word “apocalypse,” after all, literally means “revelation,” so from a marketing perspective an apocalyptic story is an appropriate medium for the “grand unveiling” of the revised DC Universe. This section will begin with a brief examination of the form and function of apocalypse narrative in myth and literature both past and present, and the ramifications of its utilization in superhero comics. Helpfully, Frederick Kreuziger makes a point of framing “apocalyptic literature as a popular literature, a literature of marginal people, the outsiders, the losers,” in order to relate it to his chosen topic of science fiction and to modern ideas of audience reception, and several of his thoughts are applicable to superhero comics--a similarly marginalized “literature of... losers” wherein apocalypticism has been a fairly common theme. This will be followed by a selective textual analysis of the *Crisis* series itself, mostly in terms of its mythological borrowings and resonances, as a contemporary, commercially oriented “cataclysm myth,” in which I hope to illustrate how *Crisis* reflected and catered to the apocalyptic anxieties of the historical period in which it was produced, the agendas of its creators, and the particular tastes, concerns, and emotional/psychological needs of its intended core audience (i.e., superhero fans).

Of course, as a story about a world-threatening disaster, one could argue that *Crisis* is hardly unique in superhero comics; as mentioned above, apocalypticism is common in the genre to
the point of conventionality, as superheroes are called on to “save the world” in one sense or another on a near-monthly basis. “The ‘extermination of the real,’ as encountered in the form of a comic book apocalypse, is little more than a plot device, a suspenseful and ultimately tongue-in-cheek twist designed to keep heroes and readers in a state of anticipation”; Crisis, however, is precisely an “extermination of the real” in a rather literal sense, mitigated only by the fact that a new-and-improved “real” instantly materializes to replace what had been lost. Here we can see the crucial distinguishing feature of Crisis on Infinite Earths (other than its unprecedentedly vast scope) that has made it so memorable, pleasurable, and/or traumatic to so many fans, and that therefore makes it worthy of the status of “superhero apocalypse myth” where so many other, more forgettable “end-of-the-world” stories fall short. Rather than confronting the hero characters with a standard physical threat, the events of Crisis undermine the ontological foundations of the heroes’ very existence—which is exceedingly tenuous to begin with, since as fictional characters, any “existence” they may have is thoroughly contingent on the continued interest and financial support of their readers and fans. In other words, Crisis on Infinite Earths contains a strong element of metafiction that foregrounds the constructed, arbitrary nature of continuity-based comic-book reality, and strategically subverts it to induce certain emotional and ideational responses in the reader. This element of metafiction is intimately connected to the thematic importance of myth and continuity in Crisis. I will argue that the most important function of Crisis on Infinite Earths as an apocalypse myth is to reconcile the desire for narrative continuity with certain extratextual realities of the comics industry by providing an appropriately mythological formula for the symbolic incorporation of the latter into the former. By allowing superhero characters to perceive their impending (editorially mandated) “death and renewal”--metaphorically presented in the story as an Armageddon-style cosmic disaster--within their own fictional frame of reference, Crisis mythologizes the very process of myth-making (and of mythological revisionism), effectively becoming a mediating myth-about-myths, or “metamyth.”

I am aware that the idea of superhero comics as “mythology” is a controversial one. Indeed, I have been pointedly informed by a few of my faculty mentors that comic books, as mass-
produced commercial fictions, lack several of the defining characteristics of “true” myths (e.g., a variable performance element, folkloristic “emergence,” and the religious belief of their audience that the events they depict are literally or metaphysically “true”), and that claiming too high a degree of synonymy between the two was highly inadvisable. Published academic opinions on the subject vary. Harold Schechter virtually takes for granted that “popular art is a projection of the collective unconscious--an expression of the deepest, myth-producing level of the human psyche.”

Geoff Klock, for his part, rejects the entire project of structural/archetypal mythological analysis of superheroes, on the grounds that it is “maieutic” (i.e., it serves only to make us aware of the obvious without contributing anything “new” or useful to our understanding) and that there is little of academic interest or value in asserting “that Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman are the thousand-and-first, -second, and -third faces of [Joseph] Campbell’s monomythical ‘Hero with a Thousand Faces.’”

Even Reynolds, one of the strongest proponents of the mythological approach, concedes that “[there] has arguably been a tendency for comic creators to legitimize their offspring by stressing their resemblance to legendary heroes or gods: a strategy to give their disregarded medium a degree of moral and intellectual uplift.” I am here at pains to assure the reader that I have tried to address the issue of mythological parallels with all due sensitivity, and to assert that I emphasize the mythological aspects of Crisis on Infinite Earths not because I wish to aggrandize it or the superhero genre in general, but because mythology, the traditional source and wellspring of “stories that need telling,” seemed the best theoretical framework to employ in analyzing the distinctive iconography and the strangely profound audience appeal of Crisis.

As for Klock’s remarks, I feel that although they have some validity in reference to shallow analyses of individual hero characters as eternal, subconsciously recycled mythical “archetypes” (e.g., “Superman as Prometheus figure”), they (Klock’s remarks) are less applicable to “tale-types,” as it is easier to gain relevant insights into the sociocultural functions and uses of recurring plot structures (such as that of the apocalypse myth) than it is to do the same with static or derivative icons. Moreover, as a multicharacter epic with a cast of hundreds but no single central hero figure (a “hero multimyth,” one might say), in which the catastrophic damage inflicted on the
DC Universe itself eclipses the fate of any one character, *Crisis* avoids the monomythic pattern disdained by Klock, suggesting that a scholarly analysis of *Crisis* has a good chance to amount to more than “extensive footnoting” of Jung and Campbell. In any case, the purpose of this thesis is not merely to catalogue formal similarities between newer and older apocalypse myths, but to define the affective power of such myths and to identify the ways in which this “power” was tapped in the *Crisis* series to serve the needs of a particular historical, cultural, and textual setting.

Finally, after analyzing the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* text and the factors that informed its creation, I will turn my attention to the long-term repercussions that the *Crisis* series has had in the course of the past twenty years. I will describe the lasting effect it has had on DC Comics and the comics industry at large, in terms of general creative/editorial policy and the drafting of new “myths” inspired by the paradigmatic example of *Crisis*; more importantly, I will also describe the impact of *Crisis* on comics fandom. The purpose of this is to evaluate the proposed mythological functions of the *Crisis* series, which, I suggest, are not necessarily those it was intended to perform by its creators. My ultimate conclusion will be that *Crisis on Infinite Earths* functioned as a powerful mythological mediator in the introduction of new ways for superhero stories to interact with their own fictional and historical contexts and with their audience; and that it encouraged new modes of time perception, new concepts of the nature of “reality,” and new generic expectations among readers of superhero comics.
I. CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME IN SUPERHERO COMICS

Continuity, and above all metatextual structural continuity, is the strategy through which superhero texts most clearly operate as myths.

- Richard Reynolds

*Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*

Sometimes you wonder, in an interconnected universe, who’s dreaming who?

- Dr. James Highwater

(Grant Morrison, *Animal Man #14*)

In the Beginning...

The convention of continuity, summarized by Bongco as “a strong element of intertextuality among superhero texts which forms a progressive series of cumulative knowledge among their readers,”¹ has not always been a major consideration in either the production or the consumption of superhero comics. It came into being gradually, achieving its present status as “an expected and integral part of the pleasure of the superhero narrative” after a few decades of trial and error.² In the infancy of the superhero genre (i.e., the late 1930s and 1940s, a period commonly known as “the Golden Age of Comics”), continuity was an almost completely foreign concept. The work of the earliest superhero cartoonists “was raw and energetic, violent and clamorous with the storm and stress of class conflict and war.” The principal pleasure of superhero comics in those days was cathartic in nature, stemming from the instillation of a wild sense of wonder and empowerment in their audience, which was assumed to consist of “kids, semiliterate workers, and later, GIs.”³ Comic books were regarded as “ephemera,” disposable artifacts to be read repeatedly, treated roughly, traded with friends, and enjoyed to the point of disintegration;⁴ stories were episodic, self-contained, and interchangeable, not designed to be read as
chapters in a serial narrative, as would later become common practice. As long as readers were kept entertained and gratified, creators were under no pressure to make individual stories “agree” with one another from month to month in any kind of logical sequence, let alone to make the adventures of one character “agree” with those of another. Even if the creators had been inclined to attempt such internal consistency, the unforgiving deadlines, heavy and varied workloads, and general sweatshop conditions under which they worked probably would have made it infeasible.

Nevertheless, even in the primordial dawn of superheroics, the serialized format of adventure comics made it necessary for certain unvarying conventional details, what Umberto Eco calls “irreversible premises,” to accrue around each superhero character, in order to make them consistently recognizable to readers (e.g., Superman is really Clark Kent; Wonder Woman comes from a hidden society of Amazons; Aquaman can breathe water, etc.)—although even these were subject to gradual alteration over time (e.g., the evolution of Superman’s ability to “leap tall buildings” into true flight).

The first hint of inclusive multicharacter continuity as it is understood today came in 1940, when the company that would eventually be known as DC Comics chose to depict nine of their most popular superhero characters having adventures together as a team, a “Justice Society of America,” thus committing themselves to the notion that all of their characters theoretically existed in the same fictional world:

In fact, it was the start of the grandiose concept that all of a company’s characters should appear together in one vast and endless narrative. For many readers, keeping track of this intricate history would become a particular pleasure. Yet by acknowledging the presence of the others, every character became a little less special, for each separate superhero had represented a different fantasy about what it might be like to be the one great hope of the world. The above observations of Les Daniels are germane to my eventual claim for continuity as a basis for community, since they describe how the introduction of continuity to superhero comics marked a transition from individual or monomythic fantasy to collective fantasy. With the advent of the
Justice Society, it became conceivable to enjoy superhero comics on both “local” and “global” levels, through the contemplation of heroes as autonomous mythic figures or of a potentially vast, exciting, pluralistic context that incorporated many such figures. Readers enjoyed the idea of seeing so many favorite characters in a single story, and the coexistence of these characters provided common ground for discussion and debate among their respective fan bases. The move toward continuity made good business sense too, since “integrating so many separate superstars into one package... introduced the idea of brand loyalty to comic book readers.”

The postwar, post-Depression period brought with it increased social and economic stability in America, a sea change that was reflected in the content and production practices of superhero comics. For one thing, the free-form, rough-and-tumble cathartic action that formerly defined superhero comics was less in demand in postwar America, the result being that the genre suffered a painfully sharp decline in popularity, and the adventures of those few superhero characters who remained in publication became more narratively stable and conservative in tone. Meanwhile, the business of comic-book production became more centralized and corporately managed, with the editors exercising more direct control over their artists; this gave comics a more unified (if occasionally totalitarian) creative vision, whereas in the past they had been the product of random ideas that were desultorily conceived and “grinded out” by overworked, unsupervised cartoonists in order to meet deadlines, sometimes with little or no concern for quality or consistency. Also, it became more common to hire separate creators to produce the scripts and artwork, rather than expecting one person to produce both, thus making it possible for more personalized attention to be paid to the content of the stories. These conditions led to the institution of tighter continuity between the individual adventures of particular characters.

The effects of this are exemplified in the work of Mort Weisinger, the managing editor of DC’s various Superman comic books throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Weisinger enforced a policy of constant, but consistent, innovation in the comic books under his care. He saw to it that new details of Superman’s personal history, new enemies and supporting characters, new powers
and weaknesses, and so on were added to the Superman mythos at regular intervals, and that these additions, if embraced by the readers, were used and reused uniformly by his writers and artists.

Every idea that worked in one [Superman] title ended up percolating through all the others.... “I would bring out a new element every six months,” said Weisinger, “to keep the enraptured kids who were our audience involved.” This was the start of the idea of an interlocking universe composed of many comic books; rather than offering independent stories that were accessible to the casual reader, the Superman comics were most enjoyable for the committed fans. Weisinger’s goal, he said, was “to prevent Superman from being just a fad.”

Weisinger’s method assumed that the accumulation and retention of back-story helped to lend gravity and permanence to superhero characters, making them seem less like flashy, ephemeral images and more like “real people,” worthy of being long-term fixtures in the lives and imaginations of readers. Thanks to Weisinger, “Suddenly [Superman] was an individual, with a people and a past, with hobbies and friends, an object of interest in and of himself.”

Two other common features of DC Comics of the 1950s and 1960s instituted by Weisinger, the monthly readers’ letters page and the “imaginary story,” testified to the increasing importance of continuity in the eyes of creators and fans. “Imaginary stories” were hypothetical scenarios, revealing how characters’ lives might be different if certain dramatic events took place in their past, present, or future (e.g., if Wonder Woman got married, if Batman’s parents had not died, if Superman committed murder, etc.). Ian Gordon describes imaginary stories as “a sort of apocrypha that further enhances [a] character’s mythological dimension,” an observation corroborated by Jones and Jacobs:

Although told in a bald-faced style that made every detail clear to six-year-olds, [imaginary stories] still managed to be genuinely bittersweet, usually by following the model of the heroic epics of antiquity, in which defeat made the brave even braver and neatly concluded their personal destinies.
Although this “mythological” enhancement is a function that, as it is one of the goals of this section to establish, imaginary stories had in common with continuity, imaginary stories are equally remarkable for the fact that they were explicitly framed and defined as taking place outside of continuity: the events they depicted were too radical or sensational to be allowed to “count” within the characters’ established histories. The rather ironic classification of certain superhero stories as “imaginary” encouraged a view of other, equally fictional stories as more valid, more “real.” Thus imaginary stories served as a kind of negative acknowledgment and reinforcement of the canonical quality of continuity, an exception that proved the rule, affirming the significance of shared context through the self-conscious transgression thereof.

However, while imaginary stories could only imply the importance of continuity to fans, letter columns gave fans the opportunity to confirm it directly. They provided “a very direct link of communication between the industry and its committed readers. If a superhero performed out of character, if a change in plot line was unsatisfactory, if there was a small mistake in art work, the fans did not hesitate to express their feelings.” Additionally, letter columns made it easier for fans to contact each other, thus helping to create friendships and community ties based on discussion of continuity and other creative aspects of the comics the fans loved. Even the younger fans, who still made up the majority of the superhero audience in Weisinger’s time, came to appreciate continuity in their own way and used the letters column to express that appreciation, writing letters “devoted to pointing out gleefully what the kids considered ‘goofs’ or ‘boo-boos’”--later to be known as “continuity errors”--“and challenging the editor to squirm his way out of them.”

Admittedly, Weisinger’s near-tyrannical diligence was somewhat exceptional. In other editorial offices at DC Comics and throughout the comics industry, the creative/editorial process remained slapdash and uncoordinated. Continuity was gaining in currency, but writers and editors were much more concerned with experimentation to discover successful new superhero story formulae than with bringing the results of their experiments into alignment with one another, and paradoxes in continuity frequently and inevitably occurred, to the dismay of few. There was some
consternation among certain older readers, “but to the vast bulk of... young readers, every new issue was like the beginning of history, and these paradoxes went unnoticed.” It was not until the 1960s, when the number of older, more sophisticated readers started on a steady increase, that continuity truly came into its own as an essential element of superhero comics.

This new breed of superhero fan, a close phylogenetic offshoot of the slightly earlier and better-established fraternity of science fiction enthusiasts, had started reading comics during the salad days of the Golden Age and had never stopped. They longed for a greater degree of continuity, both narrative and stylistic/thematic, between the comics of the 1960s and the fondly-remembered stories of their youth. However, their interest in continuity extended beyond mere nostalgia. Gerard Jones sheds some light on the distinctive, continuity-prone reading habits of these fans:

They valued memorized detail and mechanical efficiency.... They labeled and listed and ranked and included and excluded and collected with passionate exactitude--such hyperrational ordering being the most entertaining way to keep the disorder of life and emotion in check. Being able to keep track of the volumes of pseudohistorical detail that constitute continuity thus provided these fans with a vital second level of reading pleasure, while at the same time (if we take Jones at his word) serving a kind of sublimating psychological function for them. More basically, they saw strong continuity as an effective means to “willful suspension of disbelief.” For these reasons, the older fans were fervently committed to idea of superhero comics, both past and present, taking place in carefully maintained, internally consistent fictional continua. They wanted not merely haphazard stories, but entire self-contained worlds, cohesive universes of fiction. All of this depended, of course, on comic-book publishers taking the “rules” of continuity as seriously as the older fans did, and indeed, as these fans grew in numbers and influence beyond a vocal minority, publishers began to see things their way.
The Birth of the Superhero “Universe”

A slogan appearing in DC Comics “house ads” of the late 1990s touted DC as “The Original Universe.” This is a misleading claim, however: although DC Comics is the oldest extant publisher of superhero comics and its characters have been interacting for longer than those of any of its current competitors, the credit for originally coining, using, and living up to the term “superhero universe” must be given to DC’s main industry rival, Marvel Comics. From the time of its founding in the early 1960s, Marvel took an aggressive, calculated approach to continuity, thanks in large part to the singular creative vision of writer (and later editor-in-chief) Stan Lee, who saw a great deal of untapped potential in the concept. Not content with the sort of modest intertextuality cultivated by Weisinger at DC, Lee took his cue from devoted superhero fans and set about the deliberate construction of a closely interrelated “universe” of superhero characters and concepts, designed to support complex continuity from the start—unlike DC’s “universe,” where continuity evolved, sluggishly and unconvincingly in spots, from many disparate elements. Since he personally wrote almost every Marvel superhero comic published in the company’s early days, Lee was in an excellent position to put this plan into practice.

Lee exploited the serialized format of superhero comics to an extent never before attempted, writing stories that did not merely “agree” with one another but sequentially depended and built upon one another. Moreover, he made it very clear from the beginning that all of Marvel’s heroes lived in the same world and could, and would, frequently interact, to the fans’ delight. He began stories in issues of one series and finished them in other series; he inserted running subplots that unfolded for months; he consistently reused antagonists, including traditionally “generic” types such as criminal gangs and alien invaders, developing them into strong recurring characters in their own right (unlike DC, who simply invented endless new crooks and aliens as needed); he incorporated events from Golden Age stories published by Marvel’s corporate ancestor, Timely/Atlas, into contemporary stories, and he wrote stories that charted the future as well, thus creating “a single narrative that had a past, present, and future.... requiring fans to have knowledge
of hundreds of years of events to completely appreciate” the textual world of Marvel.  
and he went out of his way to include editorial footnotes to foreground the interconnectedness and to help fans keep track of it all. The end product was “the Marvel Universe,” as Lee christened it, a fictional tapestry “woven of multipart stories, cliff-hangers, foreshadowing, endless soap operas, and sustained character development. This made the stories slightly more inaccessible to casual readers but far more compelling to regular fans.”

Although this “inaccessibility to casual readers” is closely akin to the problem that would later drive DC Comics to erase their continuity via Crisis on Infinite Earths, at the time it worked very much to Lee’s advantage, since his aim was precisely to encourage “casual readers” to become “regular fans.” He perceived continuity not just as a potentially pleasurable narrative convention, but as a psychological sales tactic, enabling him “to sell not just a set of comics, but an entire line to his fans as an inseparable unit.” Furthermore, constant references to past stories helped to boost Marvel’s sales of magazines that reprinted those stories (thus introducing the notion of continuity as overt commodification of the past). Lee embraced the daunting complexity of continuity, presenting it to the fans as a desirable exclusivity—a kind of “cultural capital” (a point to which I will return), reflecting “the clannishness of the new youth culture”—but one that was easily achieved by any “True Believer” willing to put the time, effort, and money into becoming acquainted with Marvel lore. Lee’s approach to continuity was a risky and radical step, but “eventually it would help save comics and would, for better or worse, change everything.”

Meanwhile, DC Comics was on the verge of a structural innovation of their own. In the late 1950s, believing that the time was right for a superhero revival, DC editor Julius Schwartz, Weisinger’s eventual successor, set about reintroducing several of DC’s former superhero icons of the 1940s (the Flash, the Green Lantern, etc.) in dramatically altered, modernized forms; essentially, these were completely new characters with familiar names. These relaunched characters were phenomenally popular with fans of all ages. Together with the near-simultaneous arrival of Marvel Comics, they marked the beginning of a renaissance for the superhero genre, known today as “the Silver Age of Comics.” However, the older fans were vocally curious to know the fate of the
beloved Golden Age heroes of their youth, seemingly rendered noncanonical by the presence of “updated” versions of themselves. In 1961, Schwartz and writer Gardner Fox drew on the venerable science-fiction concept of the “parallel universe” to answer the concerns of the older fans: in a story called “Flash of Two Worlds,” it was established that the 1940s versions of the Flash and other DC characters were alive and well and living on a parallel Earth, dubbed “Earth-2,” while their contemporary successors dwelt on “Earth-1.” This solution greatly pleased the fans--even younger readers who were totally unfamiliar with Golden Age characters quickly warmed to the idea of another world peopled with dozens of colorful “new” heroes to enjoy--and before long, encounters between the residents of Earth-1 and Earth-2 (and several other “Earths” devised later) became a regular occurrence in DC Comics. Thus, before its continuity had solidified enough to be formally considered a “universe” (the term “DC Universe,” adopted in frank imitation of Marvel, did not enter common parlance until sometime in the 1970s), DC acquired a “multiverse,” a complex of imaginative fictional realities ripe for exploration and contemplation.

The multiverse concept was born out of a spirit of good-natured inclusiveness, a desire to show loyal older fans that the stories they had consumed in their childhood still “counted” after a fashion, thus fostering intergenerational understanding among the fledgling comics fan community. However, it proved to be of value to DC, and of interest to this study, for other reasons as well. First and foremost, the multiverse provided a convenient “catch-all” explanation for various continuity anomalies pointed out by fans, an increasingly salient concern for editors as DC’s continuity grew more dense and complicated and readers became more aware of the possibilities and pleasures of continuity (owing significantly to Stan Lee’s foregrounding of these in his work at Marvel): any DC story that did not seem to “fit,” or that was otherwise unpopular with fans, was simply said to have taken place on “a parallel Earth.” Parallel Earths were sometimes used more proactively to present experimental takes on established DC characters. Parallel-Earth versions of Superman and others are examples of what Matthew Wolf-Meyer calls literary “clones,” which “[provide] readers with familiar iconography while failing to directly confront them with the truth behind the characters”;²⁴ that is, “clones” are a way of preserving the symbolic integrity of the
primary versions of characters when telling stories that might threaten that integrity, whether chronologically (as in the case of Earth-2’s aging wartime heroes) or ideologically (as in the case of Earth-3, home to the Crime Syndicate of America, an “evil” version of the heroic Justice League). When DC Comics purchased the character libraries of various defunct comics publishers over the years, the multiverse concept was invoked to serve the commercial necessity of integrating the new acquisitions in a “story-based” manner: the new heroes were shown to inhabit different parallel Earths, thus “explaining” why the DC characters of Earth-1 had never encountered them before (the real explanation, of course, had more to do with copyright laws than laws of dimensional travel). Overall, DC’s multiverse served many of the same functions as the “imaginary stories” of bygone days, but in a more concrete and satisfying manner. Geoff Klock describes the multiverse as “a vision of ‘polytropes,’ or various metaphors, misreadings, and misprisions, of superhero continuity.”25 The accumulation of such “polytropes” within DC’s multiverse amounted to the same sort of “enhancement of mythological dimensions” imputed to imaginary stories by Ian Gordon, the difference being that the multiverse provided a “metaphysical framework,”26 a navigable spatial model of reality, in which mainstream and “parallel” events could be situated in relation to one another within a single continuum, for the benefit of those readers who felt the need for additional structure or who simply felt that events that take place on “parallel Earths” must have more gravity than those described as merely “imaginary.”

As a final note of interest to this study regarding DC’s multiverse, I should point out that the use of parallel Earths in DC Comics has always included a certain playful element of metafiction. In DC’s very first official parallel-Earth story, it was established that while the heroes of Earth-2 were indeed “real” and valid parts of DC continuity, on Earth-1 they existed only as (appropriately enough) comic-book characters; in fact, in his first appearance the Silver Age Flash was inspired to become a superhero by his love of Flash Comics from the 1940s (little knowing at the time that his comic-book idol, the Golden Age Flash, was in fact a “real person” on a parallel Earth whom he would eventually meet).27 The “dimensional barriers” between parallel Earths thus became a conventional metaphor for the “fourth wall” separating reality and fiction--or, more
precisely, separating DC Comics characters from their real-world readers. The effect of this is to reduce “reality” and “fictionality” to subjective concepts, and to introduce readers to the piquant possibility that “the comic book characters they read about might have their own ‘reality’... somewhere!” Eventually certain writers explored this idea explicitly in the pages of the comics, “placing the reader inside the infinite worlds defined within the compass of continuity. Our familiar world with no superheroes [but with comic books about them] became just one of the many alternative Earths generated by the mechanism of DC continuity.” This in-continuity version of “our” Earth, called “Earth-Prime” in the DC cosmology, was a fan’s dream come true: Earth-Prime stories depicted comic-book readers (and several DC Comics writers and editors!) interacting with DC heroes, using their textual and extratextual knowledge to meddle directly in the characters’ lives. A sense of play between levels of reality was a key element of DC’s multiverse, helping to refine readers’ conception of the magnitude and diversity of superhero mythology and to deepen their personal connection to it. This metafictional play remained strongly in evidence (although utilized in a way that was more baleful than “playful”) in the “last” parallel-Earths story, Crisis on Infinite Earths.

Continuity in Theory: Mythic Time and Eco’s “Oneiric Climate”

Although superhero comic books have long been accepted (in some disciplines more than others) as a legitimate topic of academic inquiry, most attention has been given to the visual language they employ and the themes and ideologies they convey, while comparatively little has been written to date about the elements of intertextuality and time representation, which together make up the greater concept of continuity. One recent exception is Geoff Klock’s How to Read Superhero Comics and Why, which examines continuity through the lens of literary and psychoanalytic theory, arriving at the interesting and useful observation (one of many) that “any given superhero narrative stands in relation to its conflicted, chaotic tradition, and continuity as the ego stands in relation to the unconscious.” In this view, continuity is a device by which modern
readers impose rationality on an unruly, ever-expanding body of mythological material, which in and of itself is irrational in both form and content. Similarly, David Craft describes continuity as “constructive retrospection that determines how the corpus of published work represents a coherent and logical fictional world”; in other words, Craft sees continuity as an ex post facto invention—the product of constant creative rehistoricization and recontextualization of older stories in light of newer ones, carried on by fans and creators for their own amusement and edification—rather than an inherent feature of the texts themselves.

Both Klock and Craft, in turn, call to mind the work of historian/anthropologist Mircea Eliade, who describes the use of recitation and ritual to prepare “wild” land for cultivation by symbolically transferring it from nature to culture, or in Eliade’s words, “from chaos to cosmos; that is, through the effect of ritual [the land] is given a form which makes it become real.” Eliade sees this process as indicative of an “original ontology,” under which products of nature and culture “acquire their reality, their identity, only to the extent of their participation in a transcendent reality. The gesture [or text] acquires meaning, reality, solely to the extent to which it repeats a primordial act [or text].” Superhero continuity could be said to do for texts what Eliade’s rituals do for terrain; it represents a type of “ontology” or “transcendent reality” in which an untamed mass of fictional material is retroactively ordered and acculturated, assuming a degree of meaning, validity, and “reality” by being brought into alignment with an elevated, ritualized view of history (i.e., superhero stories become more “meaningful” and “realistic” to fans if they are shown to have an immediate, substantive connection to other stories that came before and after them). I will return to Eliade’s theories, and their direct bearing on Crisis on Infinite Earths, in the next chapter.

Another study with strong theoretical insights to share about continuity is Richard Reynolds’ Superheroes: A Modern Mythology. Taking his cue from structuralist approaches to myth and language, Reynolds refers to continuity as “a langue in which each particular story is an utterance.” He distinguishes between “several different types of intertextuality” in superhero comics: 1.) serial continuity, a diachronic mode of intertextuality that concerns itself with the sequential alignment of as many published stories of a given character as possible, with as few
logical contradictions as possible; 2.) hierarchical continuity, a synchronic mode of intertextuality that takes the form of a metaphorical “squash table” charting the interactions and relationships between various characters (especially regarding fan concerns such as “who can beat who in a fight”) at a given point in time; and 3.) structural continuity, which incorporates not only the entirety of the serial and hierarchical dimensions within a given superhero “universe,” such as Marvel’s or DC’s, but also any and all additional data implied but not explicitly stated in various canonical texts, and any extratextual, “real-world” facts and contexts (e.g., information about publishers/creators; current events) that might conceivably have informed the creation of said texts.  

Reynolds makes mention of an ideal, theoretical “metatext” that could be fashioned from all extant recorded and/or extrapolatable structural continuity data from a given “universe.” Although he acknowledges that such metatexts “can never exist in any definite form,” because “no fan has in practice read every single canonical DC or Marvel title” and “new canonical titles are being added each month,” thus making it impossible to reach “any definite metatextual resolution” until superhero comics stop being published, Reynolds nonetheless asserts that active contemplation of ideal continuity metatexts “is a vital key to the way in which the mythology of comic books is articulated in the mind of the reader.”

While continuity arguably places a certain constraint on the imagination, setting parameters for the content of superhero stories based on fairly arbitrary historical precedent, Reynolds points out that “continuity is also something malleable, and constantly in the process of being shaped by the collective forces of artists, writers, editors, and even the critical voices of fans.” It has been traditionally open to alteration and variation over time, but only slowly and subtly, usually in the form of mild creative reinterpretation of established mythical events, since too abrupt or thorough a change in continuity tends to invoke the ire of fans (a fact that will be restated emphatically when we return to *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, which was purposely conceived as a way to make such abrupt and thorough change more palatable). This gradual process of revision through retelling is only slightly more rigid than similar processes observed in older narrative mythologies, as Reynolds intimates:
One element in [a] character’s myth (for example, the character’s origin) can be used to generate a potentially unlimited number of texts, even texts which seem to “tell the same story.” Continuity implies an agreed body of material which exists independently of any specific text—analogous perhaps to the way in which different medieval poets could retell the “Matter of Britain” before Malory attempted a systematizing of the Arthurian “continuity” in the *Morte D’Arthur*.

Such retellings usually contain some degree of “updating,” both for the simple sake of novelty and to put a more modern spin on older, twice-told plots and concepts.

Herein lies a fundamental paradox of serial/diachronic continuity: the importance of the observance of history to superhero fans is in conflict with “a drive for perennial contemporaneity” in the superhero genre. Problems are bound to result when a superhero’s present-day adventures are intertextually beholden to stories that were written years or even decades ago, and not merely in the sense of the earlier stories being embarrassingly “dated.” More centrally, to insure that they retain their heroic vitality (and their commercial viability), superhero characters are conventionally required to age as little as possible, even over a span of decades. To accommodate this need, superhero continuity has developed such that it “is openly non-historical and doesn’t move forward at any set pace.”

Certain concessions can be made to mitigate the illogic of this state of affairs—one could refer to Paul Ricoeur’s essay on “narrative time,” wherein Ricoeur surmises that the highly subjective, action-oriented “public time” of storytelling (especially in “hero quest” narratives) is divorced from objectively measurable real-world time understood as “a neutral series of abstract instants.” This is especially true of the stories in superhero comic books, the periodical format of which creates extra discrepancies between “real-time” and the subjective time experienced by characters: when a “cliffhanger” story is left *in medias res* at the end of an issue to be continued in the next month’s issue, an entire month of “real-time” has passed between story events, but as little as a few seconds may have passed for the characters. The overall effect is that time passes, and people age, much more slowly in the DC and Marvel Universes than in reality (although real-world trends and current events conveniently remain “current” in the comics, in
spite of the time lapse). Such rationalization notwithstanding, however, the only really “satisfactory” explanation for the vagaries of time within continuity is summed up by Reynolds as follows:

Clearly, intertextual and metatextual continuity create a subsidiary world in which the process of time can be kept under control. While this process does not exactly abolish history from superhero comics, it does divorce the superheroes’ lives from their historical context.44

In other words, fans are asked to accept that superhero comics take place in another world where time “just works differently,” and fans are generally willing to suspend their disbelief, although their good faith is not without its limits.

This kind of temporal ambiguity is not exactly unique to superhero comics. It has also been a distinguishing feature of superhero comics’ ancestors, the old heroic myths and legends, which Claude Lévi-Strauss characterizes as “machines for the suppression of time.”45 The confused sense of time that sometimes emerges in superhero continuity is akin to the eternal “mythological present” described by John Lindow in a study on Norse mythology. Similar to comics, the Norse myths were composed, compiled, told and retold by numerous individuals over a long period of time, and numerous inconsistencies arose that make it impossible to situate all of the events described within a single linear chronology. “Such inconsistencies are, let me stress, not causes for worry. They are in the nature of mythology,” Lindow assures us.46 However, this facile explanation is less applicable to the inconsistencies that arise in superhero comics. While older myths could afford to be more overtly fantastic and illogical, superhero comics, as the “myths” of a “rational” modern society, depend on continuity to bestow a form of token “realism” upon them through enforced narrative consistency.47 It is therefore possible to view continuity as a good argument for, and symptom of, superhero comics’ status as a kind of “missing link” between mythology and literature: to function in the quasi-realistic mode of the latter, they have had to forsake some of the liberties of the former.
The dialectic between myth and literature in superhero comics forms the basis for the influential observations about comic-book time and reality put forth by Umberto Eco in his seminal essay, “The Myth of Superman.” According to Eco, traditional heroic myths were developmental but self-contained narratives, with definite beginnings/middles/endings of which the audience was already aware: the stories’ symbolic/thematic potency and universality depended on this built-in “foreshadowing,” this ritualized and encoded understanding of the myths’ overall structure. With the advent of “novelized” literature, however, audience pleasure shifted from contemplation of preordained plot events to anticipation of “the unpredictable nature of what will happen”:

The mythic character embodies a law, or a universal demand, and therefore must be in part predictable and cannot hold surprises for us; the character of a novel wants, rather, to be a man like anyone else, and what could befall him is as unforeseeable as what may happen to us. Eco depicts superhero comics as being caught between the formal demands of both types of narrative, what he calls “the mythical” and “the typical”: “The mythological character of comic strips... must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable,” yet in order to remain profitable in a modern media market, his adventures must exhibit a degree of unpredictability and variation (or at least the illusion thereof).

While Eco acknowledges that superhero adventures cannot be endlessly retold as were the old myths because new stories must be produced constantly for commercial reasons, he also warns against the accumulation of character back-story (i.e., continuity) as a form of “consumption” of a character’s mythic/iconic life-force, tantamount to aging, a process that is necessary for realism but poisonous to mythology. In Eco’s theory, every time a superhero has an adventure that significantly impacts his/her continuity, the dissimulation of the passage of time is compromised and the hero “has taken a step toward death.” Yet Eco treats this “consumption” as inevitable:

The hero of the classical myth became “inconsumable” precisely because he was already “consumed” in some exemplary action. Or else he had the possibility of a continuing
rebirth or of symbolizing some vegetative cycle—or at least a certain circularity of events or even of life itself. But Superman is a myth on condition of being a creature immersed in everyday life, in the present... [he] must remain “inconsumable” and at the same time be “consumed” according to the ways of everyday life.\(^5^1\)

To explain how superhero comics reconcile these conflicting narrative mandates, Eco proposes that superheroes occupy a hazy, timeless dreamworld, an ambiguously repetitive timeframe in which sequentiality of events is obscured or abolished. Within this “oneiric climate,”\(^5^2\) as Eco calls it, superheroes are caught up in time-loops (a.k.a. “closed causal chains”\(^5^3\)) in which they perpetually relive the same span of time, but have different experiences and adventures each time. Whenever a new continuity element is added, it is as if the addition is being shown in flashback, and it is retroactively presented as having been a part of the hero’s back-story since the beginning. In Eco’s view, then, the superhero formula is intensely and narrowly cyclical, with each story bringing the hero around in a circle back to the point in time at which it began, occasionally adding to but very rarely changing the hero’s status quo; to borrow a phrase from Ricoeur, an individual story in the oneiric climate is “a mere diachronical residue, a retardation or suspension in the epiphany of order.”\(^5^4\)

While Eco’s essay betrays a certain lack of familiarity with the finer points of progressive serial continuity (especially as employed by Marvel Comics) and the ways in which readers actually use and engage with it,\(^5^5\) his ideas have nonetheless been influential in academic circles, and they speak to some of the concerns that DC Comics had regarding their continuity by the mid-1980s. After fifty years, the DC heroes’ dependence on “closed causal chains” and “irreversible premises” had led them down the road to stagnation. Therefore, in addition to paring down the staggering bulk of intertextual back-story that had accumulated around DC’s characters over five decades, it became a chief objective of the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series to partially “demythify” time in the DC Universe, to break out of (or at least reconfigure) its “oneiric climate,” to divest it of its timelessness and thrust it into a milieu of history and “relevance.” This would mean adopting a more “novelistic” storytelling mode in which individual stories would have greater historical
impact on the characters, suspense would be greater, and the characters would be more relatable to readers. In other words, to “demythify” the DC Universe was to make it more like the Marvel Universe, and Crisis on Infinite Earths would be the ironically, but unavoidably, “mythical” means of doing so.

Continuity, Community, and Fandom

As has been stated or hinted at several times in the preceding pages, continuity is an aspect of superhero comics that lies near and dear to the hearts of many devoted fans, assuming what Harold Schechter calls a “scriptural significance” for some. There are a few identifiable bases for this devotion. For nostalgic older fans, continuity is a pleasurable validation of all the stories they have read and enjoyed in years past, since continuity by definition ensures that all past stories (or at least those not explicitly labeled “imaginary”) remain canonical and relevant, inasmuch as old stories frequently inspire and precipitate new ones: the present is “continuous” with the past. Continuity also “provides a guarantee of the authenticity of each individual story,” “authenticity” in this case meaning a structural dimension of realism that facilitates suspension of disbelief: continuity can be taken as a sort of contractual understanding between creators and fans that the events of each story will be honored as immutable historical fact in all stories that follow. Not only does continuity make superhero stories seem more believable by requiring events to unfold over time in accordance with real-world principles of cause and effect, it also reassures fans that it is safe to invest themselves emotionally in the melodramatic spectacle of the characters’ lives. I have often heard fans remark that they feel “cheated” when, for example, they thrill to a poignant death scene in a superhero comic book, only to have the deceased pop mysteriously back to life again within a few months owing to an editorial oversight; this tendency to take such continuity errors as personal affronts may explain why they are sometimes described with the more graphic term “continuity violations.” Generally, fans who value continuity prefer superhero “universes” to take the form of an immaculately self-contained and self-consistent “model reality,” rather than
that of an indiscriminate slush-heap of unrelated stories that do not influence one another or convey a cohesive narrative. Such a view helps fans to deny the fundamental narrative arbitrariness to which, as fiction, superhero comics are subject, and to take the stories more seriously. In continuity, sequence begets consequence, consequence begets credibility, and credibility begets enjoyment.

For some other fans, the very process of memorizing, organizing, correlating, and applying the mountains of intertextual detail that make up continuity is a pleasure in itself, helping these fans to heighten their sense of power and control in an uncertain world. This use of continuity may have developed in tandem with comic books’ status as collectibles, and the emergence of the “collector’s mentality” as a factor in American society and culture in general. Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel, in their essay entitled “No Two Alike: Play and Aesthetics in Collecting,” argue that collecting any kind of object “is a sheltered way of confronting chaos and the ephemerality of human existence.” This is achieved through ordered aesthetic “play” among the items in a collection, play that is based in “repetition, in having a group of objects that are the same but also different. This repetition then creates a kind of logic for the collection and allows the individual items to ‘rhyme,’” and from this “rhyming” stems the orderly sense of closure that theoretically makes collecting such a rewarding activity. Continuity is another kind of “rhyming repetition”; when it is enforced, the uniformity of superhero stories functionally mirrors the uniformity (and yet variation) of the comic books that contain them, thus enabling fans and collectors to derive closure from the content of comic books as much as from the comic books themselves as collectible physical objects. In Pustz’s words, continuity-based comics offer “a world that is manageable, that comic book fans can almost literally hold in their hands. Making sure that world has... definite rules makes it more three dimensional without taking away any of its manageability.”

Although fans’ individual reasons for appreciating continuity may vary, at least one generalization can be made: continuity is of great importance as a focus for the expression of individual and collective fan identities. It is not too surprising that superhero fans should embrace continuity as a manifestation of collective self, because the concept of continuity was in a sense authored by fans almost from the very beginning. When writers and editors like Mort Weisinger,
Stan Lee, and Julius Schwartz began experimenting with the concretization of serial and hierarchical continuity, they were in many cases responding to the more-or-less articulate desires of fans, which the writers/editors divined from reader mail and personal conversations with readers. Lee in particular seemed to sense a subliminal longing for an ideal yet believable wonderland to escape into, for a “homeland” of the imagination and the sense of belonging that such an idea implies, in readers’ requests that superhero stories “hang together” better, as if the inclusion of all individual stories within the structure of continuity made the readers feel “included” as well. Accordingly, Lee made use of continuity in the construction of his readership as a translocal “community” of fans. Lee’s overall project was “to create a sense of family,” much like that which had already begun to emerge among the older devoted fans, among Marvel Comics’ creators and readers, using various textual and extratextual devices; knowledge of continuity and its putative desirability was very much a part of this. In fact, Lee actually encouraged fans to point out errors in continuity by offering the coveted “No-Prize” (really just an empty envelope stamped with Marvel logos) to any fan who wrote a letter explaining how a mistake could be reconciled with existing canon, thus rewarding readers for their diligence and making them feel included in the creative process (albeit in a small, retrospective, and largely illusory way). Through his construction of continuity and community, Lee “succeeded not only in selling his own upstart company, but in giving the fans themselves a greater sense of identity and a confidence that they had clout in the business.”

Fandom’s proprietary acceptance of continuity as a basis for collectivity truly solidified in the mid-1960s, when a few of the “new breed” of older comics fans began to be ordained as actual superhero writers, most notably Roy Thomas at Marvel and Jim Shooter at DC. These fan-writers brought about an apotheosis of continuity as a storytelling practice, reflecting their awareness (from personal experience) of “the time and emotion that readers invested in comic characters. [The fan-writers] knew that the details were not just noticed but treasured by the readership.”

For Thomas, and many of the fans who followed him into the business, the stories were of less importance than the stuff: the texture, the background details, the “continuity” of old comics to new ones. To hard-core fans, this had the effect of making [superhero] stories
seem not just like entertainment, but like the historical documents of some other world, a world whose possible reality they dearly wanted, in their secret hearts, to see reinforced. With these fans at work in the comics industry producing the kind of continuity-rich stories that they had always wanted to read, and that they knew their friends and fellow fans would enjoy as well, superhero comics began to resemble a “by fans, for fans” enterprise, helping fans to feel a closer and deeper connection to the stories, to the creators, and ultimately to each other. Moreover, the fan-writers’ meticulously imaginative, even artful uses of continuity demonstrated that, far from placing restrictions on the creative faculties, continuity could actually serve as an inspirational framework for the drafting of original story ideas, and the fan-writers’ success encouraged readers to concoct such ideas themselves and share them with one another (and with writers and editors via letter columns). As Reynolds attests, “there are limitless opportunities for small-scale sub-creation in areas of the DC or Marvel universes where fans can exercise their ingenuity and imagination within the governing discipline of overall continuity.” Such expressive bricolage serves to strengthen fan identities, and fan devotion to continuity, even further.

The institutionalization of superhero continuity and that of comics fandom were thus historically coincident and substantially interrelated occurrences, and continuity and fandom remain closely associated to this day. Wolf-Meyer, along with several other writers, indicates that hard-earned encyclopedic familiarity with continuity has developed into a “cultural capital” for fan culture, “helping to demarcate distinctions between fans, and thereby promoting hierarchical structures of knowledge.” Jeffrey Brown effectively expands on this idea, directly invoking the work of Pierre Bourdieu in describing the various ways in which the members of comic-book fan culture, who often tend to be downtrodden or socially marginalized, collectively empower themselves through their hobby. Brown states that “knowledge and the ability to use it properly amounts to the symbolic capital of the cultural economy of comic fandom,” and that “fans are what Bourdieu refers to as ‘autodidactics,’” self-taught individuals who amass and use this “symbolic capital” to increase their status as a member of the fan community, perhaps in compensation for status they may lack elsewhere in society. Brown also specifically touts “the ability of canonical
texts to endow their possessors with cultural status,\textsuperscript{70} here making reference to continuity knowledge and its relationship to the practice of collecting, as distinct from reading, comic books: not only does advanced continuity knowledge distinguish fans in and of itself, it also helps fans to identify and purchase rare key texts, the material ownership of which increases the fans’ cultural status still further.\textsuperscript{71} Thus continuity enables fans to distinguish themselves in the eyes of their peers in terms of both what they know and what they own.

Even more important than continuity’s role as a source of Bourdieuesque distinction within the fan community, however, is its capacity to strengthen and unify that community internally and to define it against the non-comics-reading mainstream majority. According to Pustz,

Nearly all comics... rely on a reader’s knowledge of past continuity, without which many stories can be completely incomprehensible. In many ways, these fannish comics flatter their readers by reminding them that they hold this special knowledge lacked by most of the population. This flattery then helps to cement the devotion to comics while giving readers a common culture.\textsuperscript{72}

Pustz identifies continuity as a crucial element of a “comics literacy” that “contributes to the construction of comic book culture by limiting the audience and giving it a body of common knowledge,” which in turn serves as common coin for fan interaction and creativity.\textsuperscript{73} Comics fandom is unique among other popular media fandoms in its very small number of “casual” members, perhaps owing to the strong sense of exclusive camaraderie engendered by this shared, specialized “literacy” of continuity. It could even be argued that continuity has come to serve a “gatekeeping function,” as its esotericism invariably presents the would-be casual reader with a hard ultimatum: become a devoted, knowledgeable member of the fan community, or despair of ever being able to appreciate the full range of pleasures that superhero comics have to offer. Pustz sees this as a sort of defense mechanism, born of a perceived conflict with a contemptuous cultural mainstream, that not only discourages the less-than-devoted from encroaching on fans’ cultural territory but also helps fandom’s “True Believers,” in Stan Lee’s phrase, to recognize one another:
A kind of siege mentality can develop among comic book fans, and the information that they use to challenge each other [in informal trivia competitions, an important performance of fan identity] works as a kind of secret handshake, allowing a new person with the requisite expertise into a group where fannish experiences are openly shared. The information can also serve to intellectualize the hobby.\textsuperscript{74}

In a way, the levels of importance that continuity has assumed are a sign that it has come full-circle as a group cultural expression: whereas fans once helped to create continuity as a storytelling convention, now continuity helps to “create” fans, not just in the sense of encouraging (or requiring) casual readers to become fans in order to better understand superhero texts, but also in terms of identity construction, since some continuity knowledge is necessary to authenticate one’s status as a fan in the eyes of other fans.

My aim in outlining the history and functionality of continuity has been to foreground the ways in which continuity helps superhero comics to function as a “mythology,” an expression of the values and communal self-awareness of a select group of people. To reiterate one of the epigraphs of this chapter, “Continuity, and above all metatextual structural continuity, is the strategy through which superhero texts most clearly operate as myths. Continuity provides the interaction with the audience which characterizes mythological discourse”; it also provides “a mythological model of society’s simultaneous unity and plurality.”\textsuperscript{75} Wolf-Meyer suggests the “mythological” importance of continuity by likening it to a form of community-enhancing historical discourse, similar to Foucault’s critique of the theoretical construction of history with a vocabulary of names, places, and events particular to the community, employed within the culture to communicate, and outside of the culture to promote itself as culturally important while retaining difference”;\textsuperscript{76} the myths and legends of various cultures have been mobilized in similar ways many times in the past. Even Geoff Klock, who has little patience for straightforward mythological analyses of superhero comics, indirectly contributes to my argument when he discusses how the issue of “authorial intentionality” in analysis is complicated by the highly collaborative creative process of superhero comics. Klock acknowledges that “comic books present the reader with a storyteller that is most
often multiple.” Superhero stories do not arise solely from the mind of a monolithic literary
\textit{auteur}, but from a multivalent confluence of not only writers, artists, inkers, editors, publishers, and
so forth, but also a battery of what Klock calls “highly accidental” (but nonetheless influential)
extratextual forces, such as the comic book industry and, most importantly, the vocal fan
community.\textsuperscript{77} And, since continuity requires that new stories proceed logically from prior ones, in a
sense the aggregate authorship of any given story extends to all the creators of every related story
that preceded it. This profoundly pluralistic mode of cultural production, including not only
numerous creators but the frequent feedback of the fan audience, makes the argument that
superhero comics are quasi-mythical expressions of collective culture (as opposed to single-
authored works of literature) seem all the more valid.

Certain notable differences between the “modern mythology” of superhero comics and
more traditional cultural mythologies do exist, of course. For one thing, while superhero comics, in
common with most other mythologies throughout history, evolved in response to the real
sociocultural conditions and needs of an existing group, superhero mythology is distinguished by
the formation of a secondary subculture, inspired and organized by their devotion to the
mythological material itself more than to the cultural ideology it reflects (“content creating culture”
as much as the other way around, to paraphrase Pustz); for another, since comic-book fandom is
“almost exclusively centered around a physical, possessable text,”\textsuperscript{78} comic-book fans may partake
of the additional (continuity-centric) pleasures of collecting and amateur mythography, above and
beyond the more basic uses and pleasures derived by earlier mythological audiences, whose
interaction with their myths was less tangible and/or less permanent (see note 47).

Before I proceed, I must concede here that not all superhero fans share the enthusiasm for
continuity that I have been describing. Today, many fans are basically indifferent to continuity,
preferring to consume and enjoy individual stories on their own merits without giving a thought to
the adequacy of their alignment with stories of the past, while other fans outright disdain or resent
continuity for the alleged burden it places on creators and the difficulties it creates for uninitiated
readers. Although these fans remain in the minority, their numbers have grown steadily and
prodigiously over the past ten or so years. It may be that the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series and its aftereffects contributed to this shift in fan sentiments, a possibility I will explore a bit further in the third chapter.

**Last Days: The Historical Moment of *Crisis on Infinite Earths***

The conditions that made the production of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* appear both possible and necessary to DC Comics were taking shape as far back as the early 1970s, when DC, in one of a long series of gambits in a still-ongoing campaign to stay competitive with Marvel Comics, first began to take steps to transcend the “oneiric climate” of its Silver Age continuity. Under this initiative, which posterity remembers as DC’s “relevance” movement, DC superheroes began to cut back on their constant clashes with alien invaders and mad scientists and to focus more on addressing contemporary social problems (drug abuse, civil rights, the Vietnam War, etc.); at the same time, “a more consistent, Marvel-style continuity was set up.”79 However, in attempting to emulate the unified, historicized structure of the “Marvel Universe,” which had been designed to support dense intertextuality from the start, DC found themselves trying to impose an unnatural unity on a huge variety of narrative elements that were never meant to coincide. DC relied more and more on their jury-rigged “multiverse” concept to string their characters’ piecemeal pasts together, thereby exchanging an ambiguous, “oneiric” continuity for one that was more explicit but also more convoluted. Meanwhile, despite positive feedback from fans, the new “relevance”-themed stories sold poorly and were soon abandoned in favor of more “timeless” themes and traditional heroic fare. The “relevance” movement left its mark, however: one of its defining features—“the aesthetic of ‘realism,’ of darkness, of pain, of moral queasiness, and of ethical uncertainty”—continued to influence the tone of DC’s superhero comics, and this aesthetic would reach a critical crescendo in the 1980s, in *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and afterward.80 Also, through its depiction of period-specific socially and politically topical issues, something not widely done in superhero comics since World War II, the “relevance” movement effectively “dated” DC’s characters,
“anchoring” their lives at a certain point in history, making the paradoxes associated with the passage of time in the DC Universe even more difficult to resolve and muddying DC continuity still further.

DC Comics’ readers were not particularly daunted by the escalating complexity of the continuity, but rather embraced it as an opportunity for deeper engagement with the material. However, while the greater complexity of continuity helped to increase solidarity among the fan community, it also helped to increase their insularity, by making it more difficult for new fans to obtain the continuity knowledge that serves as fandom’s cultural capital. To some fans, this state of affairs was a source of pleasure more than concern, an attitude that persists even today; as Pustz reports, “In some cases, fans even like new readers’ difficulty in understanding [a] series and joining that particular reading community.” DC Comics, on the other hand, definitely did not “like” it: they gradually became afraid that the very thing that devoted fans seemed to enjoy the most about DC’s comics would in the long run make those comics more difficult to sell; DC feared that continuity, the device employed sparingly by Weisinger to save superhero comics from becoming an ephemeral “fad,” was rendering them so anti-ephemeral, so thickly encrusted with narrative/canonical residue, that they would eventually become impenetrable for new readers.

Difficulties also began to arise for DC’s writers, not all of whom felt the devotion to and enthusiasm for continuity exhibited by fan-writers like Roy Thomas, but who were all nonetheless obliged to honor it. “As years went by and more stories accumulated, the job of keeping track would become almost overwhelming,” an unpleasant prospect for the less-fannish writers. Some were of the opinion that “immersion in the stuff of fandom was curtailing their growth and diverting them from the essentials of storytelling.” The result of this supposedly painful, forced association with superheroes and their intertextual heritage: “writers were burning out en masse.” The situation was exacerbated in the early 1980s when DC Comics began “importing” creative talent from other media and even other countries, gifted writers who had not had extensive enough exposure to American superhero comics to be conversant in the particulars of DC continuity, and who in some cases were fairly resentful of being expected to make use of the latter in the stories
they wrote for DC. DC Comics were operating under an “uncomfortable truce between the demands of continuity and the demands of auteurist self-expression” at about the time Crisis on Infinite Earths was conceived, thus suggesting that the reasoning behind the series may have involved concessions to writers as well as to new readers.

Still, despite DC’s displeasure with the state of their continuity as of the mid-1980s, it must be emphasized that they never had any intention of altogether expunging the element of continuity from their comics, if such a thing is even possible in a serialized medium. On the contrary, in the 1980s DC saw new evidence of how profitable continuity-based comics could be. One important factor in this realization was the expansion of the “direct market” for comic books—that is, the consistent monthly availability of comics at hobby and specialty stores, as opposed to their formerly sporadic and irregular appearances in general retail outlets. In the past, it was difficult to maintain tight continuity from one issue of a series to another because “publishers could never be sure that fans shopping at newsstands and drugstores would be able to find the next issue of a continued story.” With the advent of the direct market, publishers such as DC were emboldened to use continuity to degrees never before attempted, producing epic multi-issue serials that were very popular with fans.

Indeed, most if not all of DC’s greatest commercial successes of the early 1980s were in some way history- or continuity-oriented. Continuity-heavy stories, “which conventional wisdom held ‘was too hard for kids,’ proved to be exactly what the kids loved: a fictional world that could strain their supple memories and organizational faculties to the limit:” to all appearances, this kind of soap-operatic “total excess was what hundreds of thousands of young people in the 1980s wanted.” DC discovered that “a drastic, high-concept reworking of even a rather obscure Silver Age hero had a good-sized, built-in audience of older [fans],” which DC by no means wished to alienate, while “a continuity ‘event’ would make [certain younger] fans”--children of the 1980s who were only nascently aware of, but fascinated by, the interconnectedness of DC Comics--“check out even the most neglected old series.” According to Gerard Jones, an important trend in comics of the savvy, revisionist 1980s, and one that DC was instrumental in shaping, was “the
revamping of old heroes in a hard-edged, self-examining style that appealed to longtime fans outgrowing the stories of their childhoods.\textsuperscript{90} Such imaginative, recontextualizing synthesis of old and new elements can be construed as a compromise between the familiar and the experimental, between nostalgia and innovation, between old readers and new, and it proved a successful formula for DC (and for Marvel as well, for that matter) many times over.

Yet even this “compromise” was not enough to reassure the powers-that-were at DC Comics, who were concerned that it was unhealthy for DC to rely too much on the commodification of its own past. In keeping with the “progressive” corporate ideologies that characterized the 1980s, DC editorial felt a certain pressure to refocus on the future, in the content of their stories and in their approach to cultivating new readers. Dick Giordano, then editor-in-chief of DC Comics, saw 1985, the year in which \textit{Crisis on Infinite Earths} was published, as “a critical year” for this directive. “Giordano thought that comic books were poised to break through into the wide-open spaces of adult mainstream entertainment, and that DC had the resources to make it happen,” but that a few changes were necessary first.\textsuperscript{91} Although DC was aware that continuity could be an asset to them in the achievement of their goals, they remained dissatisfied with the \textit{kind} of continuity they had at the time (i.e., replete with fifty years’ worth of back-story, spread across a dizzying variety of “parallel Earths”) and resolved to take steps to “streamline” it. Essentially, this meant applying the revisionist formula mentioned above on a massive scale, reimagining not just individual characters but the entire “universe” in which they lived, thereby establishing a radical new paradigm for DC Comics’ relationship with its own past, in which much of that past (particularly the multiple histories associated with DC’s parallel Earths) would be summarily removed from the equation.

This decision, controversial among superhero fans and industry professionals alike both then and now, can be supported or explained in a number of ways. Dennis O’Neil, one of DC’s most influential writers, argues that “the reason that Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman have survived for fifty years is that they have changed with the times, they have adapted to the national mood, to what the audience wanted from them at a particular time.” In O’Neil’s view, such
adaptation, which requires occasional breaks with history, has been instrumental in superheroes’ ability to outlast such pseudomythical icons as Sherlock Holmes and Paul Bunyan, whose popularity (according to O’Neil) is limited by their dependence on historical context. Klock writes that “the building density of tradition becomes anxiety,” and while Klock embraces this “anxiety” as a fertile source of literary inspiration in the superhero genre, DC Comics, somewhat understandably, saw it instead as a potential reader turn-off. Richard Hanley, in one of very few published articles to take the Crisis series as a central object of study, explains how the old “multiverse” model of continuity could be considered deficient from a fan perspective: “From a continuity point of view, an unfettered proliferation of storylines is deeply unsatisfying: it has the consequence that there is just one correction strategy: postulate yet another world.” James B. South goes so far as to describe change in superhero comics in philosophical terms, as a “moral” imperative: “the past itself can trap us in a sort of conformity, or what John Stuart Mill called a custom, a habitual pattern that perhaps was once right as a prior stage of the ongoing journey but is no longer proper to its present stage.” Just as individual superheroes must change and improve themselves to be the best crimefighters they can be, so their collective historical milieu (i.e., the superhero “universe”) must change to keep up its mythological/allegorical parallelism to the real world, to keep itself “relevant,” to justify its very existence.

However, as relevant as these concerns may (or may not) have been to the thought processes of DC’s editors as they pondered a “reboot” of the DC Universe, Jones and Jacobs probably come closest to the heart of the matter with their claim that DC’s decision hinged on market share, “the passion of American business in the ‘80s, the yardstick for measuring success in a culture based more on competition than overall prosperity.” In the comics industry in the mid-1980s, the larger share definitely belonged to Marvel Comics, DC’s perennial rival. In their desperation to understand this situation, DC seized upon their continuity as a major difference between the two companies that might serve to explain the discrepancy in market share. “Readers always seemed to have fun keeping the [multiple] Earths straight... but DC people were in the habit of asking themselves what Marvel was doing better,” and they concluded that doing away with much of their
continuity, parallel Earths included, might help them in their bid “to steal the kids away from Marvel.” Thus, DC’s decision to erase their old continuity and establish a new one patterned after Marvel’s, in spite of the advantages of the old system and the problems such a changeover might create, was arguably informed by a not-entirely-rational (though typical of the times) drive to remain competitive with Marvel in terms of market share.96

Whatever the reasoning employed by DC’s editors in their decision to totally reconfigure the DC Universe, there remained the problem of exactly how to put their plan into action without estranging and/or infuriating DC’s sizable customer base of devoted fans. According to classicist Harald Reiche, audiences of mythology have a history of unfavorable (or even violent) response when storytellers take too many obvious liberties with well-known stories: “The same matrix [i.e., audience devotion] that preserves stories from casual changes proves inhospitable, too, to deliberate updating no matter how justified by changes in the objective... situation.”97 This rigidity to some extent characterizes even the more fluid oral traditions of the past, and it is still more powerfully evident in modern superhero fans’ devotion to continuity. As I have illustrated at length, continuity is of crucial importance to a great many fans as a crux of identity, community, and subcultural status, and this was even more true in 1985 than it is today. In Pustz’s words, “many comic book fans feel a sense of ownership and hence become very angry when they see professionals and publishers destroying ‘their’ hobby or ruining ‘their’ favorite characters.”98 This being so, the sort of radical overhaul of continuity that DC had in mind had the potential, if handled poorly, to be received as a heinous and unforgivable violation and affront to fans’ sensibilities, an apoplectic disruption of their lifeways, somewhat comparable to the shredding of a holy text in the midst of a congregation, and DC was fully aware that if they did not proceed carefully, conscientiously, and with all due sensitivity to fans’ high estimation of continuity, the consequences would be dire.

Clearly, there was a need for some kind of symbolic reconciliation between the equally fervent desires for continuity and change. The manner in which this need was ultimately met is evoked in the much earlier words of mythologist Claude Lévi -Strauss, describing the mythic impulse and its relationship to problem-solving, especially the reconciliation of opposing concepts:
[The] purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction.... Thus, myth grows spiral-wise until the intellectual impulse which has originated it is exhausted. Its growth is a continuous process whereas its structure remains discontinuous.99

Since continuity occupied a place and served a function tantamount to that of mythology in many fans’ lives, DC Comics decided that the demise and reconstitution of their continuity needed to be presented in “mythological” terms as well, through a kind of performative utterance intended “to make [the changes] univocal and therefore more marketable,”100 and to afford fans some closure.

*Crisis on Infinite Earths* was, of course, the grand cataclysm “myth” concocted to serve this purpose. The “Flash of Two Worlds” story, which had introduced the multiverse and complex serial continuity to DC in the first place, stood as evidence that fans could enthusiastically accept transitions between older and newer modes of fictional historicity, if framed in suitably “story-based” (i.e., respectful to the semi-autonomous mythological context of characters’ lives) terms, and now DC was determined to repeat that success more deliberately, efficiently, and profitably in 1985 with *Crisis*.101

As I mentioned in the introduction and will expand upon in the next chapter, the huge scope and metatextual implications (i.e., the self-conscious restructuring of an ongoing serialized narrative *in medias res*, with the full awareness of the characters) of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* were shockingly innovative, but not entirely without precedent. Historical conditions in 1985 were favorable for such a series. Ironically, Marvel Comics had helped to pave the way for their rival’s success. Marvel’s *Thor* series was the first comic book to substantially and explicitly play up the mythological element inherent in the superhero genre, leading to a shift in the 1970s from standard, self-contained single-issue stories to multi-issue, neo-Eddic “cosmic sagas” (including one based on the Ragnarok myth, which is an important thematic inspiration for *Crisis on Infinite Earths*); the *Crisis* series was designed to be exactly this sort of “saga.”102 In 1984, a mere year before the publication of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, Marvel had released an expansive twelve-issue series of its own, *Secret Wars*, in which all of Marvel’s major characters appeared together, but in which little of
long-term importance to continuity actually “happened”; although Secret Wars was a thunderous anticlimax, it was still very profitable for Marvel, and it inspired DC Comics to attempt (and attempt to improve upon) almost exactly the same format for its Crisis project. Also, the existence of the direct market made it more conceivable to produce a limited-duration, highly specialized project (almost arcane so in Crisis’s case, since it was designed specifically to propitiate the devoted, continuity-literate fan community) such as Crisis on Infinite Earths, because the direct market’s distribution channels made it easier for the series to reach its target audience.

Still, there was an element of risk involved. Whereas in the past, mythological revisionism—both in traditional bardic mythologies and in superhero comics—had taken place only gradually and in response to marked changes in the apparent tastes of the audience, DC Comics made the decision to produce the iconoclastic Crisis series based solely on assumptions and hypothetical evidence that their comics had grown inaccessible to new readers. DC had no idea whether or not actual fans felt that a streamlining of continuity was desirable or necessary, nor did DC make a particular effort to consult them on the matter. In effect, Crisis constituted an act of mythological revision by corporate committee, not “by the people,” and the extraordinary chance DC took in assuming that fan culture would respond well to it is yet another reason why Crisis on Infinite Earths is such a storied moment in comics history.

The next chapter is dedicated to promoting and substantiating the idea of Crisis on Infinite Earths qua apocalypse myth, selectively analyzing the text itself to demonstrate how it metaphorically and psychologically guided its readers through the “death” of the old DC continuity and the “revelation” of the new.
II. THE SELF-CONSCIOUS CATAclySM: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS AS MODERN (META)MYTH OF APOCALYPSE

It would seem that mythological worlds have been built up only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built from the fragments.

- Franz Boas

(Introduction, James Teit, Traditions of the Thompson River Indians of British Columbia)

Some consideration of death is inherent in any meditation on the constitution of history.... Is not the otherness of the past fundamentally to be seen in death?

- Paul Ricoeur

“Narrative Time”

Sometimes I forget how mortal we really are. I don’t believe I’ll ever forget that again.

- Superman of Earth-1

(Marv Wolfman, Crisis on Infinite Earths #7)

Eschatology and History: The Apocalyptic Underpinnings of Crisis

It should come as no surprise to the reader that Crisis on Infinite Earths is hardly unique among popular texts in its overt use of apocalyptic themes and imagery. “The end of the world,” as metaphor and as literal plot device, has always played an important part in American literature and culture, popular and otherwise, although it has not always been presented in the self-consciously mythological terms employed in Crisis on Infinite Earths. In his book on the subject, American Apocalypses, Douglas Robinson argues that “the whole question of apocalyptic ideology, of the historical transformation of space and time from old to new, from corruption to new
innocence, from death to rebirth, is fundamental to American literature,”¹ and furthermore, that “the very idea of America in history is apocalyptic.”² It is therefore possible to understand Crisis on Infinite Earths as belonging to a long-standing American tradition of eschatological content, to say nothing of the much older mythological apocalyptic traditions from which the series also borrows.

Apocalypticism has assumed many forms and served many functions over the centuries, a comprehensive survey of which would exceed the intended scope of this thesis. Instead of attempting to catalogue the full range of apocalyptic manifestations in myth and literature, I wish to emphasize two basic thematic aspects that are particularly relevant to my analysis of Crisis on Infinite Earths. First, “end-of-the-world” stories are very often employed as vehicles for social or cultural criticism, in both mythological/religious and secular contexts. The cataclysmic events depicted in such narratives tend to be hyperbolic extrapolations of existing values or life conditions, even those that are considered beneficial or desirable by the narratives’ intended audience. In some cases this conceit acts as an allegorical attack on contemporary ideologies and a grim prediction of their possible consequences; in others it is more admonitory than condemnatory, encouraging audiences to reevaluate their values and mores, or to be more consciously protective and appreciative of their way of life in light of its implied vulnerability. Apocalyptic discourse can be fairly ambivalent in its approach to the sociocultural material that inspires it. As Robinson writes, “American apocalypses... at once undermine basic American values and definitively express those values; they essay both a rejection and a signal exploration of American ideologies of the self, of nature, of God and the supernatural, and of the community.”³

Some theorists even go so far as to refer to apocalyptic commentary as a homeostatic process, essential to the collective psychological well-being of a cultural group. Robert Lifton, for example, takes pains to demonstrate the similarities between apocalypticism and schizophrenia: both foster paranoid or nihilistic fantasy visions, which Freud, writing of schizophrenia, interpreted as “attempts at... ‘restitution’ of the disordered self to a healthier state.” According to Lifton, myths and stories of the apocalypse do roughly the same thing for troubled populations as hallucinatory episodes do for schizophrenics (i.e., express and pursue a perceived need for psychic reintegration,
reform, “healing”), though “the element of revitalization and moral cleansing—the vision of a new and better existence—is even more prominent, and considerably more functional,” in apocalypse myths than in schizophrenia.\(^4\)

Writing on mythological elements in popular art, Harold Schechter also makes a few remarks that are easily applicable to this view of apocalypse narratives as cultural catharsis:

> [At] certain periods, in societies which have been moving in a dangerously one-sided direction, in which certain values and attitudes are emphasized to the unhealthy exclusion of other important ones, a mythic symbol will arise which will possess the imagination of large numbers of people—dominate their dreams, even shape their destinies. And this symbol will be compensatory to the outlook of the culture at large, to its dominant values and beliefs and practices. It will represent an attempt to correct, or redirect the energies of, the culture.\(^5\)

*Crises on Infinite Earths* could be reasonably construed as one such compensatory “mythic symbol,” a reaction against the turgid state of DC Comics continuity, precipitated by the needs and desires of new readers—or perhaps more accurately, it should be noted, by DC Comics editors acting in what they *assumed* to be the best interests of new and prospective DC readers of the 1980s. The series was calculated both to frame the perceived problems of reader accessibility plaguing the DC Universe and to rectify them diegetically in a single ritual/textual gesture, in a manner that would hopefully prove acceptable to the longtime fans with their “dangerously one-sided” insistence on tight, inviolable continuity. In apocalyptic terms, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is quite literally a “Judgment Day” for the old DC Universe; as Klock astutely observes, “The word *crisis* derives from the Greek *krisis*, ‘judgment,’ and... *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is interesting in its (editorial) judgment on DC’s superhero comic book universe.”\(^6\) However, the fact that *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was contrived by DC Comics creative and editorial personnel—rather than arising “organically” from the collective will of “the people,” as “authentic” mythology is sometimes thought to do—need not invalidate it as an object of study in the context of apocalypse narratives. After all, many such narratives have been deliberately crafted to serve or reflect the interests of small groups or individuals in the past; if anything, the “constructedness” of *Crisis* makes it all the more
deserving of scrutiny. At any rate, the importance of an apocalypse myth is best measured not by its origins, but by its impact.)

The second aspect of apocalypticism that I wish to discuss is suggested by another definition of the word “crisis,” taken from a history written at the confluence of the cultural studies and political science disciplines: “a turning point so decisive that the system comes to an end and is replaced by one or more alternative successor systems.” True to these words, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* provides not only a commercial and ideological “judgment” of the DC Universe as a “system,” but a historical transition into a new state of being for that system. There is an intimate connection between eschatology and the human need for a coherent sense of history, of time and change; significantly, this same need is also one of the factors that helped give rise to the convention of continuity in superhero comics, thus giving superhero continuity and apocalypse narratives a common origin point that is foregrounded through *Crisis*. One anthology of essays on apocalypticism in contemporary culture describes this need as follows:

> Human beings require consonance, they need things to make sense and are predisposed to impose structure on the existential flux, chaos and fragmentation of our daily lives. The idea that we live within [or read about] a sequence of events between which there is no relation, pattern or progression is simply unthinkable. Hence... humankind is inclined to foist a beginning, middle and end upon time[.]³⁸

Robert Lifton is inclined to view this time-ordering and time-narrativizing impulse as an expression of “the struggle for connection with those who have gone before, and those who will follow, our own limited life span; or what I [Lifton] call the symbolization of symbolic immortality.”⁹ When epochal, large-scale societal changes occur too quickly for this symbolic connection to be made, a sense of deracination and temporal anomie can result, which is accounted for in the Hindu religion as human suffering caused by the “divine madness” of the gods: “Man desperately desires stability, rationality, predictability. The gods are totally otherwise, randomly throwing out a world that is ephemeral, illogical, unstable, mad as they are.”¹⁰
Eschatology is one device by which members of various cultures have shielded themselves from the toxic formlessness of time, deploying apocalypse myths in an archetypal process of historical periodization that renders traumatic changes more palatable through allegory. According to Martin Day, “Many myths of... general annihilation,” even ones that take the form of “rational” scientific or philosophical theories, may not refer to any physical event at all; instead they may be impressive symbols for the end of one era and the start of another. The catastrophe is conceived as the means of wiping the slate clean for a fresh start.... The human experience of life dictates that the world is a continuum, but the myth of man must dramatize the end as sensed by the mind of man and a new beginning as man believes it.  

This perspective indicates that visions of the apocalypse, apart from the connotations of annihilation and terror they have come to carry, can have an optimistic dimension as well: apocalypse narratives help to dispel the unsettling notion of time as a chaotic, undifferentiated, amorphous void by presenting it instead as a definite structure with a definite terminus, and most often with a positive new beginning waiting beyond the outer limits of present existence.

Such narratives can also spare people the indignity of regarding themselves as victims of the cruel, senseless whims of “fate.” From ancient times, most civilizations have held as anathema the idea that historical catastrophes, especially the possible eventual death of their respective ways of life, could occur strictly at random. Therefore, apocalyptic notions of existential “design” (whether that of cosmic rhythm, God, or Adversary) pertaining to the entire sequence of events in the universe, including its cataclysmic end, were concocted to dignify cultural misfortune, to assign a “noble gravity” to a group’s history, and in particular to its suffering or loss.  

Appropriate to the subject of this thesis, David Ketterer describes “the apocalyptic imagination,” as he calls it in his book New Worlds for Old, as “an outgrowth and an expression of crisis,” valuable because “it teaches adaptability and elasticity of mind in the face of change.”

However, as intolerable as the concept of time as formless and arbitrary may be to humanity at large, and as helpful as the imposition of historical structure may be to assuage anxiety in an
ever-changing world, foisting too much structure (or the wrong kind of structure) on time can be just as harmful as having too little. This essential ambivalence toward history is a main point of Mircea Eliade’s *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, in which Eliade claims that “the man of archaic cultures tolerates ‘history’ with difficulty and attempts periodically to abolish it.” Such people see the accumulation of experience in a unidirectional linear continuum of time as unpleasant and oppressive (Eliade even suggests that to them “‘suffering’ is equivalent to ‘history’”), preferring to conceive of time as cyclical, a constant repetition of primal archetypal actions and events that affords regular opportunities for self-regeneration and revitalization through symbolic breaks with the immediate past. Eliade dubs the linear view, common to contemporary mainstream Western cultures, “profane time,” and the cyclical alternative “mythical time”; in superhero comics, we might say that tight narrative continuity is the equivalent of “profane time,” while Eco’s “oneiric climate” is the equivalent of “mythical time.” Apocalypse is a key element of many cultural approaches to “mythical time,” although not as a final and absolute extinction, but as a necessary part of universal and/or particular cycles of death and rebirth. According to Eliade, the death of the individual and the periodic death of humanity... are alike necessary for their regeneration. Any form whatever, by the mere fact that it exists as such and endures, necessarily loses vigor and becomes worn; to recover vigor, it must be reabsorbed into the formless if only for an instant; it must be restored to the primordial unity from which it issued; in other words, it must return to “chaos”...

Examples of cyclical or mythical time include the Hindu conception of the universe as “the Breath of Brahma,” dissolving and reconstituting with the constant rise-and-fall rhythm of the deity’s chest, and the Babylonian cultic belief that “the universe is periodically reduced to chaos and reorganized at every ‘Great Year.’” Eliade avers that “it is justifiable to read in this depreciation of history..., and in this rejection of profane, continuous time, a certain metaphysical ‘valorization’ of human existence.”

Thus apocalypticism has the potential both to historicize and to dehistoricize, to intensify or attenuate the degree of structure and repetition acknowledged in a culture’s concept of time,
sometimes even managing to do both within the span of a single myth or prophecy. I would argue that *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is one such paradoxical text. In the “Great Year” of 1985-86 (so regarded because it marked the fiftieth anniversary of DC Comics’ founding), the editorial powers-that-be at DC Comics, motivated by “disjunctive expectation” (Frederick Kreuziger’s term for the kind of frustrated idealism that often informs the creation of apocalypse narratives), conceived *Crisis* as “a temporal re-structuring of history” within their published mythology, “an attempt to break out of a cycle, created not by history, but by exaggerated claims made in the name of history [i.e., continuity].”20 This “cycle,” in DC’s case, could be understood either as the stagnant predictability of the “oneiric climate” or as the recondite incomprehensibility of a fictional universe laden with fifty years’ worth of narrative continuity. Time and reality in the DC Universe had become at once too “profane” and too “mythical” for DC’s business agenda, and a reformation was called for.

This was accomplished by taking DC’s continuity “from chaos to cosmos,” in Eliade’s terminology: the already chaotic DC Universe, with its parallel Earths and numerous story inconsistencies, was reduced to total, primordial chaos via the allegorical cataclysm depicted in *Crisis*, so that it could subsequently be “cosmicized” anew in a more intelligible, reader-friendly configuration. This process freed the DC Universe from its dysfunctional history and replaced the latter with a vision of time that maintains a more stable balance of the linear and the cyclical. In this, *Crisis* emerges as “[the] moment of juxtaposition and consequent transformation or transfiguration,” identified by Ketterer as the climactic crux-point of any apocalyptic historical transition, “when an old world of mind discovers a believable new world of mind, which either nullifies and destroys the old system entirely or, less likely, makes it part of a larger design.”22 Most importantly, by narrativizing these changes in “mythological” terms as an apocalypse story, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* lends some “noble gravity” to the passing of the old DC continuity, and to the discomfiture of the devoted fans who loved and supported it. The *Crisis* text provides form and closure, and a suitable transition into a disconcerting new era.
As an apocalypse myth, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is somewhat atypical and difficult to categorize, due in part to the fact that its symbolic ramifications apply almost exclusively to a fantastic fictional world, rather than to the “real world” on which that fiction is loosely based. In Douglas Robinson’s schema of “apocalyptic hermeneutics,” *Crisis* would probably qualify as a “continuative” apocalypse (i.e., dangerous but survivable, merely a traumatic, revolutionary moment in “simple secular historical continuity”) from the perspective of those characters who experience it firsthand. To readers, however, it functions more like an “ethical” (“internalization of apocalyptic as a figure for personal growth in ongoing history”) or a “Romantic” apocalypse (“the end of the world” as a macrocosmic metaphor for a major shift in perception: the old world “ends” only in the sense that people are made to see and accept it in a radically different, presumably “better” way). While the universal chaos depicted in *Crisis* has very real consequences for the superheroes of the DC Universe, reweaving the very fabric of their reality, readers are not necessarily meant to read this chaos as having any bearing on their own lives (in contrast to most apocalypse narratives, which use cataclysm as metaphorical commentary on real social problems), but rather as a symbolic rite of passage from a familiar paradigm of fictional reality and history to a new one.

*Crisis on Infinite Earths* is also a bit unusual in its ambiguous ideological relationship to its own apocalyptic elements. Historically, apocalypses have been portrayed as either rapturous or disastrous, as passages to a better state of being or to perdition and the void. *Crísis*, on the other hand, seems to attempt to be both. The text contains several passages and allusions that suggest the devastation of the old DC Universe is a “natural” and inevitable occurrence serving a necessary purpose, but the overall tone of the story unmistakably skews negative. This may be partially explained by the contemporary context in which *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was published, which, as Ketterer reports, is generally unreceptive to positive portrayals of apocalypse: “If previously the sense of an apocalyptic reality included the belief in positive new worlds elsewhere or elsewhen, the negative aspect of apocalyptic thought, with its emphasis on destruction, Hell, and chaos, today enjoys a revitalized secular acceptance.” This is especially true of the superhero audience, whose
essential conservatism is emphasized by Matthew Wolf-Meyer as follows: “Because superhero
comics are predicated on preserving the status quo, they expect of their reader-ship a conservative
reading strategy that translates into desire for conservative narratives.”

This would imply that any time a “radical narrative” such as *Crisis* is attempted in
superhero comics, it must be couched in terms acceptable to the conservative (crudely translatable as
“hostile to change” in Wolf-Meyer’s usage) fan community if it hopes to be successful.
Therefore, although the revision of the DC Universe timeline and the unification of the parallel
Earths conceivably could have been accomplished in a peaceful or benign manner, instead it took
the form of a universe-ravaging catastrophe. Such a portrayal was likely to reflect longtime fans’
feelings on the subject of continuity revision. Additionally, the image of “obsolete” characters
dying in action while fighting a cosmic menace, rather than passively vanishing from existence
unheralded, helped to valorize and dignify their subsequent exclusion from DC Comics canon and
relieve the distress of their fans. One gets the impression that the *Crisis* series’ creators would
have ideally preferred for readers to accept its progressive continuity reforms in a positive light, to
see them as the creative and commercial benefit they were intended to be; but, realizing the
unlikelihood of this, the creators instead allegorized said reforms as a horrific cosmic disaster in
which many heroes and worlds “die,” as a sympathetic concession to passionate DC Comics fans
who would never see such drastic changes to their favorite fantasy-world as anything less than a
tragedy.

Martin Day mentions that one of the identifying features of eschatological myth is that it
“posit[s] a rigid, static finality, a changeless condition in contrast to the unceasing change of the
world we know.” This is not necessarily true of *all* eschatological myths, as Eliade’s
observations on cyclical time and regenerative apocalypses indicate, and it cannot be wholly true of
superhero comics, since true “finality” is never an option for a perpetually serialized popular
medium. Change (or at least the illusion thereof) is essential in superhero comics for sustaining
reader interest, and so superheroic “eschatology,” as exemplified in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, can
at best offer simplification or intensification, or the institution of a new basic status quo around
which constant variations will continue to be made. An ironic, unresolvable tension between conflicting fannish desires for both tradition and innovation, stability and iconoclasm, the familiar and the fantastic, is central to the superhero genre; it could be said that *Crisis on Infinite Earths* exists to dramatize this conflict of desire, and to demonstrate the apocalyptic outcomes when such conflicts reach a literal “crisis” point in history.

**First Movement: “And Thus Shall the World Die!”**

What follows is a partial analysis of the actual text of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* itself. In the interest of space, I am unable to give this sprawling, densely polysemic 360-page opus of graphic fiction the exhaustive, meticulous panel-by-panel interpretation it deserves; instead, I will restrict myself to the “broad strokes,” to those plot points, major characters, and instances of verbal and visual imagery that best illustrate the intended functions of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and the ways in which the story invokes symbologies of traditional apocalypse myth in fulfilling those functions. For the sake of convenience, I have divided my analysis into subsections corresponding to three arbitrary phases or “movements” of the text (roughly four of the twelve chapters per “movement”). As the analysis progresses, the reader may note how the basic plot of the *Crisis* text follows the classical apocalyptic formula proposed by James M. Rhodes: “disaster, revelation of the way to salvation, discovery of the fundamental forces of Evil and of the imminence of a final attack by those forces, discovery of one’s own election to fight the ultimate battle against the evil forces--all leading to a vision of the subsequent millennium.”27 The main body of the analysis is followed by brief sections detailing those elements of the text that mark it as a product of the apocalyptic imagination of its specific historical context (i.e., the 1980s) and foreground its self-reflexivity as a “metamyth” of the superhero genre, respectively.

Mircea Eliade writes that “the cosmic myth [of origin/Creation] serves as the exemplary model” for any ritual observance “whose end is the restoration of integral wholeness” (which is precisely what *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was intended to accomplish in the DC Universe), and that
creation myths are therefore ceremonially repeated on those occasions. He also notes that “the mythical visions of the ‘beginning’ and the ‘end’ of time are homologues.” Thus it is unsurprising that Crisis on Infinite Earths opens with an account of the “origin myth” of the DC Comics “multiverse” that is about to die. I will quote this one-page prologue in full:

In the beginning there was only one, a single black infinitude... so cold and dark for so very long... that even the burning light was imperceptible. But the light grew, and the infinitude shuddered... and the darkness finally... screamed, as much in pain as in relief. For in that instant a multiverse was born. A multiverse of worlds vibrating and replicating... and a multiverse that should have been one, became many.

Note the conspicuous appropriation of biblical language and tone (“In the beginning...”) and the subtle ideological inflection of the phrasing, most particularly the words “a multiverse that should have been one.” This phrase takes for granted that there is, and always has been, something inherently flawed and unnatural about the multiversal structure of the DC Universe. DC’s multitude of “parallel Earths,” instituted in the 1960s in response to fan concerns about continuity but perceived in the 1980s as a threat to the company’s commercial viability, is here singled out as an aberration, a dangerous anomaly that compromises all of existence. This sentiment is repeated a few times over during the story, in a rather transparent attempt to guide the reader into accepting that the imminent destruction of the multiverse is “meant to happen” in order to correct something that “went wrong” in the familiar world of DC Comics.

From the “origin myth” of the multiverse, the story jumps to the present, segueing directly into a preliminary example of the devastation and suffering that is the major motif of the Crisis story, as if to further strengthen the implied connection between the existence of the old multiverse and inescapable doom. In this opening scene, we bear witness to a grim spectacle that is repeated--in keeping with the series’ title--ad infinitum throughout the text: the planet Earth, in the process of being engulfed by an immense, implacable wave of energy, resembling a giant white wall that moves slowly forward and disintegrates everything and everyone in its path. There is a large double-page image of a city street, packed with people fleeing in terror from the white wave--eventually
revealed to consist of “anti-matter”—as it swallows the cityscape behind them, but their flight is to no avail: the wave consumes not only the street, the people, the city, and the Earth, but the entire universe and all matter in it. Then the whiteness itself disappears, obscured by swirling black mists.

This image of universal megadeath by reality-negating “anti-matter” is a very important symbol. Described variously as a “nothingness” and an “emptiness” within the text, the anti-matter wave represents not merely destruction, but nullity, total nonexistence, to which its victims, being comic-book characters, are dangerously close to begin with; indeed, the “white wall” of anti-matter closely resembles the ultimate figure of nullity for fictional characters: a blank page.\(^{33}\) The white wall also evokes Eliade’s description of “the deluge” as a conventional vehicle of apocalypse, bringing about “abolition of contours, fusion of all forms, return to the formless.”\(^{34}\) Just as water is the primal medium from which “real” human life emerged, the blank page is the primal medium for superheroes, and so in both the biblical flood and in *Crisis on Infinite Earths* beings are reabsorbed by their birthing element, with only a chosen few spared. In apocalypse narratives that are less peculiarly keyed to the world of superheroes, blackness might make a better symbol of non-being, as a reference to the eternal primordial night, or *Nox*, named in Greek mythology and elsewhere as the original null-state of Creation. However, since in *Crisis* whiteness signifies absence or nonbeing, then blackness instead signifies presence, and indeed, the black mists that appear following the destruction of Earth in the opening scene seem to creep in a slow, deliberate manner, as if guided by a sinister intelligence, an image rendered all the more menacing by the eerie lack of narrative captions (which are almost irritatingly common elsewhere in the text) in the panels that depict it. The symbolism of the blackness is not merely one of annihilation and nullity, but of malice, of evil intent, of the presence of a definite enemy. In short, it is “foreshadowing,” in a very literal sense.

As this scene of global and universal annihilation is repeated later in the text, it is established that, as with many other legends of the apocalypse, there are certain symptoms or “final signs” that signal the end of worlds in *Crisis*. The skies over a doomed world turn red and stormy, and there are a series of bizarre “natural disasters” (tornadoes, volcanoes, etc.). Finally, accompanying the
arrival of the universe-devouring white wall of anti-matter, there appears a human figure, one of several fascinating and complex original characters created specifically for the Crisis series, all of whom help to fill the role of “psychopomp” (i.e., a supernatural spirit guide, often a deity, associated in many mythologies with the conduction of the souls of the dead to the Underworld) in guiding the old DC Universe into death, and in guiding readers past it into the new DC Universe created during Crisis. This figure is Pariah, a tortured soul who has been thrust into the roles of cosmic mourner, reluctant ghoul, and helpless harbinger of doom by forces beyond his control. A wretched, wraithlike figure in a green cloak, his face a permanent fright-mask of grief and horror, he is cursed to be irresistibly, automatically shunted to the sites of cosmic disasters, which he is then forced to witness, powerless to do anything to aid the millions who die before his eyes, as the Cassandra-like warnings he issues always come too late. Pariah cannot even join the victims in death, despite frequent suicide attempts, as his curse always transports him away to the next tragedy before he comes to harm. Every time a parallel Earth dies in Crisis, he is always present to view the devastation for which (as we later learn) he himself is indirectly responsible... “and the man called Pariah can only cry!”35 Pariah is present amid the chaos of the opening scene, and his passionate words help to put the horror of the present situation in perspective for the reader on both a macro- (an entire universe is ceasing to exist) and a micro-level (a small child dies screaming in the anti-matter, as Pariah tries and fails to save him). Finally, Pariah himself disappears, moaning an ominous proclamation that further emphasizes the horrific scope of Crisis: “Another Earth is to be swallowed by the dark. And I... I must attend as I have the hundreds which have died before it.”36

True to Pariah’s words, the scene immediately shifts to the next “parallel Earth” to fall to the anti-matter. This time, the sense of tragedy is augmented still further by the fact that this parallel Earth is one with which DC Comics fans are familiar: Earth-3, home to the Crime Syndicate of America, a band of super-powered malcontents and would-be conquerors who are evil Jungian “shadows” of the Justice League of America. For years, the Crime Syndicate had terrorized their Earth and attempted to conquer others, coming into conflict with their Justice League counterparts several times since their first appearance in 1964 and becoming fan-favorite villains in the process--
yet in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, as the white wall comes to claim them, “[their] last moments alive are spent trying to save [their Earth].” The failure of these Justice League doppelgängers to save their universe or themselves faces the reader with the chilling possibility that the Justice League themselves may fail similarly when the anti-matter reaches the mainstream “universe” of Earth-1.

However, the deaths of the Crime Syndicate and of Earth-3 also have a deeper significance. As Geoff Klock reports, the *Crisis* series served other purposes beyond the simplification of DC’s continuity:

*Crisis on Infinite Earths* was not designed to simply change the DC universe but to retroactively restructure it around a new organizing principle, specifically, the “adult ethos” [of the 1980s], the very significant demographic shift that made the target audience of the comic book companies eighteen to twenty-four-year-old college-educated males. Comic books were now expected to tell stories for adults using the building blocks of children’s literature.

In a way, *Crisis* is a “coming-of-age” saga, a “rite of passage” for DC Comics and its fans, a myth of transition not just between historical periods, but from juvenility to “maturity.” Like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, it can be read as an allegory for the violent death of an “innocent” but no longer practicable way of life. As “shadows” (or “clones,” to borrow a term from Wolf-Meyer) of the Justice League, the Crime Syndicate are a manifestation of negative human traits that their pristine heroic doubles could not be allowed to have, traits that were sublimated, expurgated, and projected away from the heroes by their creators, only to resurface with a vengeance on Earth-3.

The death of the Crime Syndicate parallels the death of the naïve Manichaeanism characteristic of the Golden and Silver Ages of Comics, under which “good” and “evil” were seen as pure moral absolutes that could be kept separate on either side of the dimensional border between “parallel Earths.” With the Crime Syndicate gone, the flaws and fallibilities they represent could be reintegrated into the personalities of the Justice League, allowing them to exist as more three-dimensional, internally conflicted, morally complex characters in the years following *Crisis*. 
This same “end of innocence” agenda is also advanced through strategic manipulation of generic expectations throughout Crisis on Infinite Earths. As Richard Reynolds insightfully reports, “Far from being as ‘escapist’ as is claimed, most superhero comics are intensely grounded in the normal and everyday. There is a constant delight in showing the mundane nature of daily life.” The fantastic elements of the superhero narrative in a way function to symbolically celebrate and elevate the mundane elements, the all-important status quo of human society; even the fantastic elements themselves tend to assume a formulaic, repetitive or predictable “everyday” character, which can be comforting to readers (Eco calls this the “hunger for redundance,” describing it as a potentially beneficial search for release from the unpredictability of real life).

Crisis on Infinite Earths, however, makes it a point to deliberately break readers out of the safe, predictable mode of storytelling to which they are accustomed. Numerous scenes in Crisis introduce various characters in the midst of a typical scenario, one that fits reader expectations for that character or genre (e.g., the Blue Beetle foiling kidnappers; Anthro the cave-boy capturing a herd of mammoths; cowboy character Bat Lash getting thrown out of a saloon, etc.), only to shatter the familiar formula through the jarring, uncanny introduction of some phenomenon connected to the cosmic havoc of the Crisis story, to which the character (and the reader) reacts in shock and awe. This strategy is much like one identified by Paul Ricoeur as a common feature of folk tales, in which the protagonists experience a period of dreamlike archetypal “timelessness” before the story begins in earnest. As a result, “the tale assumes an oneiric dimension [cf. Eco’s “oneiric climate” in superhero comics] that is more or less preserved alongside the heroic dimension of the quest,” but that “has to be superseded by an act of rupture... by which the world of action emerges from the land of dreams--as though the function of the tale is to elicit the progressive time of the quest out of the regressive time of imaginary travel.”

Crisis on Infinite Earths is full of such “acts of rupture,” which breach the “regressive time” of the oneiric climate, as expressed in repetitive comic-book story formulae, through the motif of repeated surreal disruptions of the generic status quo by mysterious forces. The most memorable of these occurs in the second issue of the series, when a stereotypical Batman/Joker
battle, the likes of which these two characters had played out countless times over the years, is interrupted by a ghastly apparition: a phantasmal image of the Flash, luminous and corpselike, appears long enough to rave about the death of the world and to cry for help (“Save us... save us... SAVE US...,” a collective plea made on behalf of the entire soon-to-be-defunct DC continuity) and promptly disintegrates. The effect of this unprecedented image of the apparent grisly death of a classic superhero is potent indeed, especially in light of the fact that Batman, well-known and admired by superhero fans as a paragon of grim courage, resourcefulness and self-mastery—a character who does not feel fear, but creates it—is shown to be just as afflicted with terror, confusion, and helplessness as the reader presumably is, exclaiming, “Dear God--What is happening?”

Another noteworthy example is found in a scene set during World War II, as a soldier named “Flower,” a peace-loving farmboy and archetypal innocent, is slain by anti-matter and vanishes in a white flash. Although death in war—and even in comics about war, of which DC Comics has published many—is hardly unusual, such an eerie, “unnatural” death against the backdrop of the much-idealized “last good war” creates a strong impression that there is another “war” afoot on a higher plane (i.e., the events of Crisis on Infinite Earths), a war exhibiting outlandish differences from any before seen, in which the stakes are frighteningly high. Flower’s horrified commanding officer—Sgt. Rock, DC’s most iconic war-themed character—gives voice to the feelings of the reader who has just had his/her generic expectations shockingly violated yet again: “He... he disappeared! Things like that don’t happen in war.” These “ruptures” add to the pervasive atmosphere of apocalyptic horror that is so important to Crisis, laying bare the mortality of beloved characters and their worlds as familiar myths crack open and bleed narrative chaos, but they also make a bold statement about DC Comics’ dedication to permanently disrupting and redefining “business as usual” in the DC Universe.

Meanwhile, within an impossibly high-tech satellite orbiting Earth-1, a strange figure observes these fateful goings-on with grave interest. This is the Monitor, a sedate but powerful being whose great cosmic purpose in life is, as his name implies, to watch over all reality. In a
clever bit of intertextual foreshadowing, DC’s editors had arranged for the Monitor to make multiple cryptic cameo appearances in various DC comic books--always in shadow, his physical appearance and motives kept hidden--during the months leading up to *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, so that the character was already known to DC’s readers when the series began. Now, the Monitor--a pink-skinned humanoid with a protruding brow and dark eyes, vaguely cavemanlike in appearance, but clad in a futuristic armored tunic--is finally exposed as a benevolent or messianic force, as this heretofore passive observer takes action to save the DC Universe.

After viewing the destruction of Earth-3, the Monitor dispatches his aide and companion to gather a team of characters, heroes and villains alike, to serve as his agents. This aide, a young woman named Lyla, is an interesting character in her own right. Orphaned in a shipwreck as a young girl, Lyla was rescued and raised by the Monitor, who also trained her to become the superpowered warrior-scholar known as the Harbinger. Part Delphic priestess, part Valkyrie, part psychopomp, she is (somewhat awkwardly) described as “solidified manifestation... created reality... the untapped cerebral powers released in one being”--in other words, she is an avatar of human willpower and imagination, as agential as Pariah is powerless. Harbinger/Lyla is perhaps the most dynamic character in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*; her role is fluid and multiply significant, and she performs many different functions in the changing DC Universe both during and after the *Crisis* series. First, however, she appears in the role of *nuntius Dei*, a heralding angel sent to gather those chosen by her master in preparation for the end-times.

It is important to note the extent to which the plot of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is driven by the actions of new characters, such as the Monitor, Harbinger, and Pariah, who were created exclusively for the *Crisis* series. Although dozens of familiar DC Comics superhero characters have significant parts to play in the advancement of the narrative, the new characters are far more central. This diversion of focus from the standard heroic protagonists to a small circle of unknowns helps *Crisis on Infinite Earths* to avoid falling into the monomythic pattern in which most superhero stories are told; the result is what might be called a “hero multimyth,” similar to the *Iliad* in that its central concern is not the allegorical trials and tribulations of a single character.
but those of an entire interdependent transglobal community, a massed network of heroes and villains, leaders and pawns, gods and men. Jason Craft suggests why such a decentered approach is important to *Crisis*:

*Crisis* invites the reader to think globally about the DC Universe as a system. Dozens of panels in *Crisis* depict not heroes or combat but globes; frequently, the heroes stand above multiple interconnected Earths, moons, and universes, contemplating their fate. The point of focus is on the network *as a whole*, on the array of global versions and their interactions.45

By supporting an enormous cast, delegating many of the important functions of its plot to newly created “open signifier” characters, and declining to favor a single protagonist, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* avoids domination by the legendary aspect of any one character. Rather than limiting itself to being merely “a Superman story” or “a Flash story,” *Crisis* emerges as something that had never been attempted before: “a DC Universe story” per se, “a grand tragedy of the system” to which scores of iconic heroes and villains contribute, but in which the only truly central character is the setting, the DC Universe itself. The *Crisis* story is thus able to trace a dynamic, albeit tragic, “character arc” for the DC Universe, from old continuity to new.47

Once Harbinger has gathered the designated champions--taken from many different time periods and parallel Earths, representing as diverse a sampling of DC Comics’ character catalogue as possible--aboard the Monitor’s satellite, the Monitor addresses the group in person. He tells them that the anti-matter menace plaguing the multiverse is indirectly attributable to the multiversal structure itself, which makes “each world weaker than the whole it was meant to be” and therefore leaves all of the individual parallel universes vulnerable to anti-matter encroachment (more anti-multiverse propaganda aimed at the readers). The Monitor also reveals that the anti-matter is not so much a “natural” phenomenon as a weapon of war, wielded by a specific adversary--as yet unnamed and unseen--with the fiendish intent of wiping out the multiverse, one universe at a time; and that the Monitor himself, being “linked with all positive matter,” grows weaker and less capable of thwarting his enemy’s attacks with every universe that perishes. The Monitor says that he has erected several huge, towering machines--again, these are dispersed throughout many exotic
settings and time periods (ancient Atlantis, Camelot, the American Old West, etc.), as a way of showcasing the diversity that the DC Universe has to offer its readers—that will fortify the remaining universes against the anti-matter onslaught; it is his champions’ job to protect these machines from the enemy. Much of the first four chapters of Crisis is devoted to the Monitor’s agents and their struggles against the enemy’s minions, a host of stygian “shadow-demons” bent on destroying the machines. These demons, which overtly resemble living silhouettes of the Monitor himself, are another constantly recurring element of the Crisis text. Their touch is as deadly as that of the anti-matter wave whose path they clear, and they claim the lives of many DC characters; in a way, they are like personified, malevolent microcosms of the Crisis story itself.

The first major climax in the plot comes at the end of the fourth issue, the front cover of which hysterically proclaims, “This Is It! The End Of The World!” As the battle with the shadow-demons reaches a fever pitch, the Monitor, watching as always from his satellite, is confronted by Harbinger, who has been possessed by the Monitor’s enemy. With tears in her eyes, she fires a fatal energy blast at her master, slaying him, and falls down in a faint. However, what neither she nor the enemy realize is that the Monitor expects and welcomes Harbinger’s betrayal, since he has foreseen that his own death is necessary to his plan to save several universes. Therefore, in killing her “lord” and father figure, Harbinger is merely playing the part of an Oedipus or Judas, helping to fulfill a “prophecy” to accomplish a greater good. Following this tense moment, fraught with mythical symbolism, the scene shifts briefly to the Monitor’s champions, watching in horror as the anti-matter wave finally reaches them. There follows a sequence of images depicting a plethora of planets, the entire contents of two parallel universes (those containing Earth-1 and Earth-2, the first two parallel Earths of DC’s multiverse), streaming off into oblivion, then fading to white, then to black. The first “movement” of Crisis on Infinite Earths ends on this ominous note.
Second Movement: The Many Deaths of the DC Multiverse

Despite the apparent finality of the “white-out” climax described above, in the next chapter we learn that the universes of Earth-1 and Earth-2 and their respective superhero populations were not obliterated, but simply moved out of danger, funneled into an interdimensional “netherverse” created by the Monitor out of his own life-essence at the moment of his death. This is in keeping with a common motif of creation myths in which the birth of a cosmos depends on the sacrificial dismemberment of a deity, to provide raw material for the construction of worlds. Unfortunately, the Monitor died before his machines were properly calibrated, and as a result, “The vibrations which separate the universes are slowing down... the universes are merging... and when they occupy the same space at the same time... they will destroy each other!” Again, here is evidence of DC’s ideological project to highlight the weaknesses of its own multiverse; even when safe from aggression, the DC multiverse, as realm and as publishing concept, is depicted as being at risk of self-destruction, due to its allegedly inherent ponderousness and lack of structural integrity.

As a further bizarre side-effect of the Monitor’s rescue gambit, the flow of time in the two universes has been disrupted to the point that all historical eras are manifesting at once in the same space. This leads to some memorable pastiche visuals of dinosaurs, Roman architecture, alien tourists, Revolutionary War minutemen, World War I biplanes, and other historical eclectica juxtaposed in a single scene, and some equally memorable character interactions between representatives of DC’s various “period” genres (e.g., Westerns and space opera). Craft lauds this creative juxtaposition as one reason why Crisis on Infinite Earths deserves to be thought of as “the most fully-realized example (as of that time) of the multivocal potential of the comics universe as a fiction network.” In apocalyptic terms, it brings Crisis into alignment with certain archaic New Year rituals, which, according to Eliade, are like miniature annual “apocalypses” intended to purge and revitalize people’s experience of time at regular intervals, and which are associated with “the resurrection of the body”:
The dead can come back now... (is not primordial chaos reactualized?), and they will come back because at this paradoxical instant time will be suspended, hence they can again be contemporaries of the living. Moreover, since a new Creation is then in preparation, they can hope for a return to life that will be enduring and concrete.\

Eliade additionally cites the ancient Christian eschatologist Lactantius Firmianus, who prophesied that in the end-times “all things will be confounded and mixed, against divine and natural law.” Thus the resurrection and miscegenation of history in Crisis on Infinite Earths, along with the intermingling of characters from different genres and different “parallel Earths,” constitutes a violent regurgitation of the entire “cultural memory” of DC Comics fans, in preparation for the “new Creation” to come.

While the heroes of two Earths attempt to make sense of the anachronistic anarchy, the reader is finally introduced to the Monitor’s mysterious “enemy,” the master of the shadow-demons and the anti-matter wave, the DC Universe’s newly anointed god of death. He is a tall, cadaverous figure in heavy armor, clearly inhuman, the utterly warlike master of a dark anti-matter universe that exists parallel to the positive-matter multiverse. His aim: to eradicate all positive-matter universes and absorb their energies, thus making himself the all-powerful ruler of the only universe left in existence. His name: The Monitor! However, it quickly becomes clear that this is not the same benevolent observer and caretaker to which readers have already been introduced, but his Jungian shadow, an anti-matter doppelgänger who is soon referred to in the text, for reasons of convenience as much as anything else, as “the Anti-Monitor.” As a primal, iconic, demonic being of “pure evil,” the Anti-Monitor is not a terribly complex character, but his existence as such is necessary to the overall project of the Crisis series. While some cultures that have produced apocalypse myths have imagined the end of the world as a natural catastrophe or even a necessary step in the evolution of being, many other cultures have “denied any ‘natural’ death, ascribing all extinction to violence, and as the individual life is violently terminated so is the entire cosmos.” Since the superhero genre is fundamentally based on violent conflict and produced for a largely
conservative fan culture, it is not surprising that a superhero apocalypse myth should follow the latter pattern in having a definite antagonist.

As it happens, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* walks a fine line between the “Natural Catastrophe” and “Great Destroyer” formulae (but favors the latter): the anti-matter wave that brings about universal extinction appears much like a “force of nature,” and the new universe that replaces the old ones is described explicitly as the “natural” and proper state of being, the universe that “was always meant to be,” yet the entire process of universal renewal is set in motion by an abominable, personified evil and accomplished through mass genocide. The inclusion of the Anti-Monitor and his shadow-demons as instigators of the apocalypse gives DC Comics fans an identifiable “villain” to root against, to bear the brunt of any displeasure fans might feel at what is being done to their beloved DC Universe. In essence, the Anti-Monitor serves as a scapegoat for the actions of DC editorial, who conceived of the *Crisis* event, made the decisions as to which characters would live or die, and are therefore technically the real-life “villains” of *Crisis*.

Like his good twin, the Anti-Monitor is not above recruiting outside help from among the preexisting characters of the DC Universe. In addition to his temporary possession of Harbinger, he captures the Flash and the Red Tornado, both members of the Justice League, and attempts to exploit their powers for his purposes. Most importantly, he finds a willing lackey in the Psycho-Pirate, a supervillain who is first recruited by the Monitor but who voluntarily defects to the Anti-Monitor. Originally a petty criminal who gained the power to control emotions from a magic mask, the man who became the Psycho-Pirate donned a red-and-black harlequin suit and embarked on a life of super-crime, until his powers began to overwhelm him and drive him insane. In *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, he is a figure of abjection, appearing alternately as a tormented addict; a megalomaniacal psychic vampire; and a sniveling, toadying coward.

The Psycho-Pirate’s importance to *Crisis on Infinite Earths* cannot be overstated; indeed, twenty years later he is now remembered as a living symbol of the *Crisis* series and the manifold changes it brought about. Mythologically speaking, he is a trickster figure, an archetypal stock-character in myths who represents liminality, marginality, disorder, transgression, and the revelation
of unpleasant truths. According to Harold Schechter, “the trickster is a being who is happiest when he is creating chaos, disturbing the peace,” and who “symbolizes primitive, instinctual forces [e.g., emotions] with great potential for destruction.” Often, tricksters act as demiurges, playful innovators and bricoleurs with the godlike power to shape reality and to facilitate the formation and/or destruction of worlds; examples can be found in many Native American folklore traditions, and in the Norse god Loki, who played a major role in the apocalyptic saga of Ragnarok. The Psycho-Pirate has always been a liminal figure in that he is a link between eras, having first appeared in the “Silver Age of Comics” as a new villain to fight old, recently resurrected superhero characters from the “Golden Age.” (Interestingly, the multiverse concept that Crisis on Infinite Earths was designed to dispose of first appeared at roughly the same time as the Psycho-Pirate, inspired by roughly the same desire to bridge the imaginary gap between historical periods past and present.) Since Crisis on Infinite Earths is itself a liminal phenomenon, designed to facilitate a historical transition, the use of the similarly liminal Psycho-Pirate as an iconic character in the Crisis text is appropriate. As a trickster-demiurge, he shapes the subjective reality of people’s emotions, tricking them into feeling what he wants them to feel, a skill he employs to sow global chaos for the Anti-Monitor. However, since his power depends on his modeling emotions on his own face before he can inflict them on others, and since using his power subjects him to a painful psychic backlash, he must always be the first victim of his own tricks.

The Psycho-Pirate is a personification of the emotional cost of wars and disasters, an aspect that had been little considered in superhero comics prior to Crisis on Infinite Earths, which combines elements of both war and disaster. The text repeatedly goes out of its way to portray the emotional responses of the everyday residents of the DC Universe, and to show the hero characters in unfamiliar attitudes of fear, grief, doubt, despair, and desperate hope, all emotions that the heroes rarely experienced within the generic security of the old “oneiric climate.” Emotion is one of the main themes of Crisis on Infinite Earths—the devastation in the story is framed as a state of mind as much as a physical occurrence (in the words of the Monitor, “The menace we deal with is one of emotion.”), and the series itself was conceived in anticipation of the emotions of DC fans, serving
as an expressive catharsis and a meaningful transition for them—and the character of the Psycho-Pirate is crucial to the expression of that theme.

Following the salvation of Earth-1 and Earth-2, the thwarted Anti-Monitor turns his attention to the last three remaining positive-matter universes. These are Earth-4, Earth-S, and Earth-X, each of which represents a defunct comic-book publisher whose character libraries DC Comics had recently acquired (Charlton Comics, Fawcett Publications, and Quality Comics, respectively). The Anti-Monitor dispatches his anti-matter wave to consume these universes, and he bids the Psycho-Pirate to use his demiurgic talents to twist the emotions of their billions of inhabitants (the strain of which drives the Pirate further into madness), infecting them with rage and terror and inciting them to hasten their own destruction by leaping into the white wall of anti-matter. Heroes from Earths 1 and 2 arrive and try to keep the peace until Harbinger is able to simulate the Monitor’s Christlike sacrifice, temporarily expending her power (and assuming a conspicuously crosslike position to do so) in order to become a living portal through which the threatened three universes join the two “saved” ones in the netherverse. Now, where there were once “infinite Earths,” there remain only five, each representing some element of the old DC continuity--two Earths representing DC Comics of the Golden and Silver Ages, three representing foreign superhero pantheons to be “assimilated” into DC’s mythology--that has been deemed worthy, in the “final judgment” of DC editorial, to survive the apocalypse of Crisis and to be incorporated into the unified, holistic fictional reality that will follow. All parallel universes that do not fit the editorial “grand design” have been consigned to the void.

Once the five universes are secure, Harbinger and Pariah gather representatives from each and provide them with some historical perspective on the threat they face. The resulting pages of exposition expand upon the ad hoc “origin myth” of the multiverse seen on page one of Crisis on Infinite Earths. The story begins some ten billion years ago on the planet Oa, located at the geographic center of the universe, home to a race of godlike immortals whose advanced science had made their world an Eden. That is, until a renegade Oan researcher named Krona (the name is synonymous with “time”) dared to use his science to look back through time to observe the origin
of the universe, ignoring the Oan “legends” about the apocalyptic consequences for doing so. Krona’s hubristic tampering with time set off a chain reaction that splintered the single universe that was into an infinite multiverse of parallel worlds, while simultaneously creating the “evil” anti-matter universe. DC’s readers were already very familiar with Oa and its inhabitants long before Crisis on Infinite Earths was published; the immortal Oans are the founders and patrons of the Green Lantern Corps, one of DC’s most enduringly popular superhero team concepts, and they have been DC Comics mainstays since the Silver Age. Now we learn that they created the Green Lantern Corps as a force for good to atone for the “original sin” of their brother Krona. The recounting of Oa’s role in the unfolding story of Crisis fits Eliade’s description of the symbolic “return to the Center” that occurs as part of purification rituals in some cultures: Oa represents the “axis mundi,” literal “center” of the cosmos and juncture between heaven and hell, from which all worldly good and evil springs and whose fall presages the apocalypse. 61 (Rome is similarly portrayed in ancient Judeo-Christian eschatology.) Furthermore, Oa’s involvement in this cosmic tragedy helps to legitimize the newly minted “origin myth” of the multiverse for fans by grounding it in the established canonical history of the DC Universe.

Shortly after Krona’s fateful experiment, a pair of powerful beings were born—one matter, one anti-matter—emerging from the surface of the respective moons of Oa and Qward, Oa’s “parallel” counterpart in the anti-matter universe. 62 These beings were the peaceful, benevolent Monitor and the bellicose, nihilistic Anti-Monitor. At some point each became aware of the other’s existence, and they engaged in a furious battle that lasted one million years. The conflict between these two characters perfectly fits the mythical archetype of “the battle between hostile brothers,” through which “the struggle between civilized consciousness and its primitive shadow side is portrayed”; 63 in fact, they refer to themselves as “brothers” in the Crisis text. Depending on one’s interpretation, the “shadow-play” between Monitor and Anti-Monitor betrays an allegorical connection to the real-life circumstances leading up to the publication of Crisis on Infinite Earths. The Monitor can be read as a representation of the contingent of fiercely loyal DC Comics fans who are/were most dedicated to the old DC Universe and its cluttered continuity. He is a symbol of
potentiality and passivity, of being and creation in static form, more a spectator than an agent, dedicated to cultivation and contemplation of the status quo; he is also an all-seeing oracular figure, a god of encyclopedic knowledge, not unlike certain DC Comics readers who can recite years’ worth of DC continuity by chapter and verse.

The Monitor’s “brother,” on the other hand, is aggressive, ruthless, and single-mindedly destructive, interested only in conquest and assimilation. In this, the Anti-Monitor could be seen to represent a number of real-life entities: the harsh realities of the comic-book market; a new generation of readers who cared little for continuity and were interested in superheroes primarily to see action and violence; the encroachment of outside media that were anxious to adapt DC’s superhero characters but saw the characters’ long and complicated histories as an impediment. In any case, the Anti-Monitor stands for forces or conditions that are inhospitable to DC continuity, that think it does not matter (hence a new connotation for the use of the term “anti-matter” in the story). The presentation of such entities in villainous guise is somewhat ironic, for it was DC Comics’ desire to ingratiate themselves to these same entities that drove them to simplify DC continuity, and thus to create Crisis on Infinite Earths as a mythical mediation between the corporate objectives of DC Comics and the needs and desires of devoted fans. Interestingly, in the story the Anti-Monitor is created first, with the Monitor arising “as if in protest to some cosmic imbalance” (fans as reactionary?)\(^64\); also, the Anti-Monitor is “born” wearing armor, while the Monitor spends his first millennia of life naked, suggesting a sort of “nature/culture” opposition between fans and the industry (fans as “noble savages”?). It is also significant to note, of course, that the Monitor is ultimately outmatched, forced to martyr himself at the hands of his “child” Harbinger in order to save even a small part of the old multiverse from oblivion--perhaps hinting that a kind of “sacrifice” is necessary for the devoted fans as well, inasmuch as they must be willing to accept compromise if the DC Universe is to adapt to a changing world and survive in any form at all.\(^65\)

The Monitor Bros.’ million-year-long duel ended when they rendered each other comatose in a massive mutual energy blast. Nine billion years later, the proverbial “sleeping giants” were
awoken by another renegade scientist, this time a human on one of the parallel Earths, whose intellectual arrogance drove him to repeat Krona’s mistake and seek the forbidden knowledge of universal origins. The scientist’s experiments not only revived the Anti-Monitor, but put him in control of the anti-matter wave that would eventually cause the deaths of millions of worlds; the scientist’s home world was the first of the “infinite Earths” to fall to the Anti-Monitor. The scientist himself survived, however, protected by his technology, and he floated in a kind of purgatory for millions of years, until the Monitor, whom he had also accidentally revived, retrieved him and “cursed” him with immortality and an irresistible affinity for cosmic destruction. As penance for his hubris, the wretched scientist--now called Pariah--became a living sign of the apocalypse, forced to watch countless universes die at the hands of the Anti-Monitor. Yet his suffering--comparable to the ironic punishments of the ancient Greek sinners of Tartarus, such as Sisyphus or Ixion--served a purpose: Pariah was a homing beacon that the Monitor (and, during Crisis, his champions) could use to follow the movements of his bloodthirsty “brother,” the better to study and ultimately halt them.

The parallels between Pariah and Krona’s “original sin” and the old mythological trope of the “forbidden fruit” or “Pandora’s box” of taboo knowledge are obvious enough, but they have special significance in the context of the old DC Universe, as Klock explains:

The metaphor of this biblically styled story is unavoidable: by looking into origins, existence is splintered into a variety of mutually exclusive interpretations that have no center. The current state of the DC Universe [in the mid-1980s]--all of the continuity problems and confusions and paradoxes, Umberto Eco’s oneiric climate--is the retroactive result of looking too closely for a guiding and originating principle. The search for “a guiding and originating principle,” literally pursued by Krona and Pariah in the text, is here figuratively imputed to the real-life DC Comics fans and creators of years past, whose desire for a closer continuity between the published adventures of superhero characters past and present led to the creation of the multiverse concept, and thus to the complexity that supposedly necessitated the revision of the DC Universe through Crisis on Infinite Earths. Following Klock’s
logic, the figure of Pariah exists to promote the idea that in some sense continuity-loving fans share in the “responsibility” for *Crisis*.

Following this extensive debriefing on past events, the mightiest heroes of five universes gather for a preemptive strike against the Anti-Monitor, with Pariah as their guide. To reach the enemy’s stronghold in the anti-matter universe, however, the heroes must depend on yet another heavily symbolized new character making his debut in the *Crisis* series. This is Alex Luthor, last survivor of the Manichaean moral mirror-world of Earth-3. Alex is the infant son of Earth-3’s Lex Luthor—the only superhero on a planet ruled by villainous doubles of the Justice League—and Lois Lane. Just before Earth-3’s destruction in the first chapter of *Crisis*, Alex’s father launched him to safety in the parallel universe of Earth-1, where he was taken in by the Monitor. In keeping with Earth-3’s tradition of distorted reflections of the rest of the DC multiverse, Alex Luthor’s origin is a sort of inversion of Superman’s famous origin (i.e., rocketed as an infant from a dying alien world to become the super-savior of Earth), making him yet another in a class of “orphan messiah/psychopomp” figures that litter the *Crisis* text. Also like Superman, his journey from one world to another allowed him to gain superpowers; namely, Alex spontaneously evolved into a liminal being whose body is an impossible combination of both matter and anti-matter, being and nothingness—quite literally a “difference between life and death.” This allows him to serve as a living portal to the anti-matter universe, through which the heroes travel on their symbolic “journey to the underworld” to confront the Anti-Monitor.

However, as a tragic side-effect of Alex Luthor’s power, he grows quickly from infant to young adult, maturing physically and mentally (though not necessarily emotionally) in a matter of days. The idea of a childlike figure appearing in times of war or disaster/apocalypse to bring hope or salvation (“And a little child shall lead them...”) is an old one. “Symbolically speaking, the opposite of war, aggression, competition, death-machinery,” all definite symptoms of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, “is the eternal child,” *puer aeternus*, a mythological archetype that flourished in classical times and also in 1960s counterculture, characterized by androgyny and “holy innocence.” Alex is indeed androgynous enough—he is slender and ephebic, clad in skin-tight
golden armor with little anatomical detailing, and he has a mass of curly red “flower-child” hair—but any “holy innocence” Alex has is rapidly lost, a casualty of cosmic war. Instead of the *puer aeternus* of the 1960s, Alex is its tragic 1980s inverse: *puer brevis*, the ephemeral child. He is symbolic of “childhood’s end” for DC Comics and their longtime fans, the lost innocence of the old DC Universe of the Golden and Silver Ages, sacrificed in the name of enhanced “maturity” and marketability, to help DC Comics meet the supposed demands of new readers in the 1980s. In the words of the Monitor, “My heart *cries for you,* child--for an *innocent* must be corrupted that a universe may live.”

This idea of “lost innocence” recurs throughout the text, as various heroes face personal “crises” of commitment and identity brought on by a growing sense of their own newfound mortality, and the theme noticeably intensifies after Alex Luthor “opens [the universe] like the biblical parting of that crimson sea” for the heroes to pass through and begin their assault on the Anti-Monitor. In the anti-matter universe--a dark and infernal realm that can be equated with irrelevance and obsolescence, the oblivion awaiting all fictional characters who cease to hold the public’s interest--the heroes find that their powers malfunction or fail entirely in battle with the Anti-Monitor’s sentinels, indicative of the heroes’ powerlessness to save themselves from the impending continuity revision. Most disheartening of all, Supergirl--Superman’s teenage cousin, an angelic figure representing youth, vigor, purity, and hope--engages the Anti-Monitor in hand-to-hand combat, and although she succeeds in critically injuring her enemy and forcing him to retreat, she dies in the process, the first truly major DC Comics character to die in the *Crisis* series.

Not only does the death of Supergirl, a poignant emotional milestone for many older DC fans even today, intensify the “end of innocence” theme and the related apocalyptic sense of loss that the *Crisis* text goes to such great lengths to develop, but it serves another ulterior motive that DC Comics had in crafting the *Crisis* apocalypse. In addition to simplifying the history and structure of DC Universe and recalibrating the general tone of their superhero comics to appeal to an “adult ethos,” DC used *Crisis on Infinite Earths* as an opportunity to streamline and “monisticize” their most popular individual characters (primarily Superman, Batman, and Wonder
Woman), to pare them down to their monomythic essence and let their iconic “specialness” shine forth, ostensibly to make them more accessible, more symbolically potent, and more marketable. This involved weeding out and discarding from canon any perceived redundancies in the mythoi of these heroes, all the various distaffs, spinoffs, clones, and adjutant concepts and characters that had accrued to the central characters over the decades. This “ritual purification” of individual hero icons was simply folded into the larger “purification” process of continuity revision, as enfigured in Crisis. “Our goal was to make Superman unique,” Crisis writer Marv Wolfman recalls. “That, sadly, was why Supergirl had to die.”

Following close on the heels of the death of Supergirl, an even more important DC superhero meets his end as Crisis on Infinite Earths unfolds: the Flash, a character who is synonymous with the aesthetic and narrative paradigms of the Silver Age (including the vilified multiverse concept, which was introduced in an issue of The Flash in 1961) and with the simplistic, “clean” and “innocent” values that informed them. The Flash spends much of Crisis on Infinite Earths as the prisoner of the Anti-Monitor, but he manages to break free in the eighth chapter, as the Anti-Monitor, having lost the ability to destroy the rest of the DC multiverse through the “force of nature” that is his “white wall” of anti-matter, instead resorts to mundane weaponry like any petty tyrant, constructing an “anti-matter cannon” to destroy the five surviving universes. In a classic sequence, as memorable for its gruesomeness as its portrayal of heroism, the Flash destroys the cannon at the cost of his own life, running around it at super-speed to dismantle it even as its corrosive energies reduce him to an ambulatory skeleton; finally he disintegrates altogether, leaving nothing but an empty costume. As he runs, however, his speed-powers send after-images, or “flashbacks,” across time and space, creating the eerie apparitions of a dying Flash that have appeared earlier in the text, thus foreshadowing his own heroic death and adding to the anxious atmosphere of apocalypse that pervades Crisis.

Taken together, the deaths of Supergirl and the Flash are thematically similar to the tragic death of the light-god Balder in Norse myth, which was an omen and a direct impetus of the apocalyptic cycle of Ragnarok. As with Balder, the deaths of Flash and Supergirl symbolize the
end of a classical period, reveal the fragility and impermanence of old ways, and herald the beginning of a new, uncertain age. Stunned by these iconoclastic images of death, which many would never have deemed “possible” in the conservative arena of superhero comics, DC fandom of the 1980s held its collective breath as the second movement of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* drew to a close.

**Third Movement: The Beginning of the Future**

The final movement of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* begins with a lull in the main plot. Following the Flash’s sacrifice, the Anti-Monitor has disappeared. The lull is filled by a one-chapter plot digression entitled “The Villain War”—an interlude of traditional hero/villain physical conflict to appease those readers who prefer basic superhero slugfests to “natural disasters,” cosmic Grand Guignol, and apocalyptic melodrama—in which all the supervillains of five Earths, taking advantage of the confusion caused by recent events, organize themselves into a conquering army and overrun Earths-4, -S, and -X. Working together, the five Earths’ heroes turn the tables on the villain army with relative ease, although a few are injured or killed in the struggle. Although the Villain War is included in the story mainly for generic and nostalgic reasons, rather than for its suitability to the apocalyptic project of the main plot, it nonetheless fits certain traditional formulae for apocalypse narratives, such as that of the Hindu Kali Yuga, in which an age of global rule by “evil” (demons, inveterate sinners, et al.) is identified as a finite stage of future history preceding the final “judgment.” The “battle royale” aspect also brings to mind the cosmos-shattering “war of the gods” central to the Norse Ragnarok, but here the combatants do not destroy one another; instead, the superheroes subdue the villains but immediately recruit their aid in expectation of the Anti-Monitor’s next attack, thus fulfilling an earlier prophecy of the Monitor: “[Our] greatest hope lies with both so-called heroes and villains, fighting alongside each other.” This redemptive
moral ambiguation foreshadows the new, more “mature” DC Universe to come after Crisis, in which the divisions between “hero” and “villain” would not be so clearly drawn as in the past.75

As it happens, the Anti-Monitor’s attack comes even before the Villain War has fully concluded. Following his most recent defeat at the hands of the Flash, we learn that the enraged Anti-Monitor destroyed his own universe with its millions of inhabitants (“Let them know that they die serving the greater good!”76) and used its energy to travel back to the dawn of time, where he plots to rewrite the “origin myth” of the multiverse such that his anti-matter universe will be the only one that comes into being. This situation gives new meaning to Eliade’s ruminations about myths of origin and apocalypse being connected, since the DC Universe now stands in danger of ending before it ever began. Teams of heroes and villains are quickly dispatched back in time to deter the Anti-Monitor, but this time the day is saved not by “a concerted effort of the heroes of five universes”—as has become the pattern in the story, presumably in anticipation of the five universes shortly becoming one—but by a deus ex machina: the Spectre, a ghostly, near-omnipotent superheroic personification of the Judeo-Christian “wrath of God,” come straight from the pages of Revelations to vanquish the being trying to usurp God’s rightful place as universal creator (and destroyer). Aided by the combined magic of a cadre of superhero sorcerers, the Spectre seizes the Anti-Monitor. There is a huge conflagration, and as happened at the end of the first movement, this installment of the story ends in an ominous fade to white, accentuated by an image of jagged glassy shards (representing the shattering of continuity as DC Comics readers know it) and a dire proclamation: “And, from the dawn of creation...comes death... It is the end of all that was.”77

The following chapter, appropriately titled “Aftershock,” finds the various heroes and villains abruptly returned to the present, the apocalyptic confrontation at the dawn of time seeming little more than a dream. However, on closer inspection, they discover that they have not returned to the same world that they left. This is suggested to the reader on the first page, which is a retelling of the “origin myth” from the beginning of the text, but with a conspicuous difference:

In the beginning there were many. A multiversal infinitude... so cold and dark for so very long... that even the burning light was imperceptible. But then the light grew, and the
multiverse *shuddered...* and the darkness *screamed* as much in pain as in relief. For in that instant a *universe* was born. A universe with mighty worlds orbiting burning suns. A universe *reborn* at the dawn of time. What had been many became *one.*

Whereas the narrative captions for the original “origin myth” are accompanied by a row of identical images of Earth and its moon (a common visual throughout the text), this version displays only one large, sturdy-looking globe. As this retelling—again, subtly weighted to emphasize the “cold and dark” of the old multiverse and the preferable “might” of a single universe—indicates, history has been altered by the primordial clash between Spectre and Anti-Monitor; in the aftermath, there are not infinite parallel universes, or even five, but a single, univocal reality with an unconflicted linear history, containing only *one* version of each character. Moreover, this is the way things have “always been”: the infinite Earths are not merely destroyed, but never existed at all in this new reality, their timelines hybridized and differentially incorporated into that of the new universe (which, conveniently enough, is based primarily on the most profitable and “mainstream” branch of DC’s old multiverse, Earth-1).

To their consternation, only those characters who returned to the dawn of time can now remember the multiverse that was (and even they retain the memory only temporarily, as it turns out). This confusion of time and memory may sound like a product of contemporary science fiction, but it is also an expected element of certain historical models of apocalypticism. The merging of Earths and timelines into one recalls the purgatory “fusion of all forms” mentioned by Eliade, while Plato reports that in the cyclical cataclysmic rebirth of the universe, time will run backwards, and the reborn universe will be repopulated not with new beings, but with reiterations of the old ones “returned to life, without preserving any memory of their former state of life.”

With all due apologies to the “anti-matter”-induced chaos, carnage, and hysteria of the earlier chapters, this “time-warp gimmick,” as Les Daniels rather wantonly calls it, is the truest “apocalyptic” event of *Crisis on Infinite Earths.* An old, embattled reality has perished, and a new one has been born violently from its ashes, purified of the burden of history and ready to begin time anew. The “Aftershock” mentioned in the title of this chapter of *Crisis* refers to a sort of self-
reflexive, post-apocalyptic “culture shock” experienced by DC’s heroes as they struggle to adjust to a strange new world that has no memory of the old world, or of the apocalypse that claimed it—a “shock” felt most intensely by those characters whose very lives have been erased from the new DC Universe history. (I will address this fascinating portion of the text in slightly more detail in an upcoming section on Crisis on Infinite Earths as metatext.)

This period of exploration and adjustment for characters and readers is cut short when the Anti-Monitor launches his final assault, abducting the “new” single Earth into the anti-matter universe (also recreated thanks to the battle at the dawn of time) and infesting it with his lethal shadow-demons, thus opening the final chapter of Crisis on Infinite Earths. When the customary team of heroes is gathered to oppose the Anti-Monitor, one final, significant new character, created specifically to serve a function in the apocalyptic scheme of the Crisis text, stands among them: Superboy of Earth-Prime, the parallel Earth intended to represent “the real world” (i.e., that of the reader) in the old DC multiverse. We are told that this Superboy had only recently debuted on Earth-Prime, the first of his kind on his (“our”) world, poised to trigger a whole dynastic era of superheroes there just as the appearance of a Superman had done on Earth-2 and Earth-1—only to have this bold future taken away when Earth-Prime, ostensible home of the readers of Crisis themselves, was destroyed(!) by anti-matter. Superboy himself escaped, however, and is prepared to die to avenge his world. Superficially, “Superboy-Prime” represents a type of “second coming,” the reemergence of a historical messianic figure (in this case, Superman) in a new but familiar form, taken as both a gesture of salvation and a precursor of doom in several eschatological traditions. On a more literary level, he represents the tragic sacrifice of future potential—implicitly, that of the abandoned multiverse concept. The destruction of his/”our” Earth in the text may be read as a way of symbolically terminating readers’ personal investment in the old DC continuity. Alternately, the fate of Earth-Prime, world of cathected “reality,” can be equated with the fate of Earth-3, world of cathected “evil”: both mark the end of an aesthetic of naïveté that was invested in holding the DC Universe separate from the complexity and ambiguity of “the real world.” The
black-and-white distinctions of “good/evil” and “fantasy/reality” would not be so clearly marked in the “adult ethos” of the post-\textit{Crisis} DC Universe.

As dozens of characters battle the Anti-Monitor and his demons, Alex Luthor uses his powers as psychopomp to guide the Earth and its heroes out of the darkness of the anti-matter universe, until only he, Superboy-Prime, and Superman of Earth-2 (i.e., the “original,” 1930s/40s version of the character) remain trapped there with their foe. When the final conflict comes down to Earth-2 Superman and the Anti-Monitor—the first superhero and the ultimate ender of stories, the Alpha and the Omega, as it were—the Anti-Monitor is reduced to his most basic form, “a living, killing fireball,” and is finally destroyed for good. Then, Alex converts himself into a luminous portal (he is “the Way and the Light”—the liberal application of biblically derived imagery continues) to an ill-defined paradisical “elsewhere,” a kind of Valhalla in which he, Superboy-Prime, and Superman and Lois Lane of Earth-2—all characters from parallel Earths that have been wiped from existence, forgotten heroes with neither pasts nor futures in the revised DC Universe—can find “everlasting peace.”  

Several other obsolete or redundant characters, unsightly remnants of the old DC continuity, achieve a similar “final reward” (e.g., Wonder Woman of Earth-2 goes to live with the gods on Mt. Olympus), while still others simply die horribly in battle with the shadow-demons; whether readers loved or hated these quaint old heroes of yesteryear, they were bound to find a character “swan-song” that appealed to them. In any case, as \textit{Crisis on Infinite Earths} draws to a close, any inconvenient reminders of the recently vanished reality-that-was are effectively removed from consideration, so that history in the DC Universe may begin anew.

\textit{Crisis on Infinite Earths} concludes with a two-pronged ideological message to readers on how best to interpret the apocalyptic destruction and upheaval they have just witnessed. The first part of this message is uttered by Harbinger, as she and Pariah, two characters whose very existence has been predicated on foreshadowing and protagonizing “the end of the world,” try to decide what to do with themselves in the new world that has arisen from the ashes of the old:

The Monitor once told me that life must \textit{never} stand still. It must constantly move ahead.

We should never forget the past, but we should always look to the future... because that’s
where we’re going to spend the rest of our lives.... I can’t wait to see what tomorrow will bring.\(^4\)

This bland, Pollyannaish injunction to “embrace the future” in the wake of the symbolic apocalypse of *Crisis* is followed by a more interesting passage, a cautionary vignette suffused with an air of urgency and menace that more befits the apocalyptic atmosphere of the text as a whole. In the epilogue on the final page of the text, after all the existential anguish and heroic sacrifice and cosmic-scale *Sturm und Drang* of the preceding pages have run their course, we are left with the pathetic image of the Psycho-Pirate, would-be demiurge of the DC Universe, who has been driven utterly insane by his ordeal and is now confined to a padded cell, straitjacketed and isolated, bound like the Norse trickster Loki in anticipation of the next Ragnarok to come. We learn that the retroactive changes wrought by the events of the *Crisis* narrative have grown so profound that even those characters who temporarily remembered the old multiverse and its fragmented history have forgotten it, and accepted the new reality as the only one that has ever been; aside from Harbinger (and, of course, thousands of real-life DC Comics readers and fans), only Psycho-Pirate is now able to recall DC’s old continuity, and the “unnatural” burden of this knowledge only intensifies his suffering. In the end, Psycho-Pirate--an obsessive or addictive personality, immature and weak, compulsively feeding on second-hand emotions but simultaneously and irrationally hurt and maddened by them--appears as an embodiment of what the creators of *Crisis* may have seen as some of the worst traits of superhero fandom. In his final, delirious soliloquy, the Pirate gives voice to an implicitly fannish sentiment that the *Crisis* creators are at pains to discourage:

I’m the *only* one left who remembers the infinite Earths. You see, I know the *truth*. I remember *all* that happened, and I’m not going to forget. Worlds lived, worlds died. Nothing will ever be the same. But those were *great* days for me.... You see, I like to remember the past because those were *better* times than now. I mean, I’d rather live in the *past* than today, wouldn’t you? I mean, *nothing*’s ever certain anymore. Nothing’s ever
predictable like it used to be. These days... y-you just never know who’s going to die... and who’s going to live.\textsuperscript{85}

Thus the Psycho-Pirate falls prey to one last poisonous emotion: nostalgia. As he ends his speech, the final panel of \textit{Crisis on Infinite Earths} pulls back to reveal the new, single Earth floating serenely floating in space, accompanied by a caption that reads, “Not the end; the beginning of the future.” The tone of this concluding statement is apparently one of hope and optimism, but it also carries the force of an official fiat, a stern preemptive edict issued to those in the audience who might still be inclined to think that the death-laden cataclysmic tale they have just finished reading does indeed constitute an “end.”

The didacticism of these passages is clear. Through the apocalyptic medium of \textit{Crisis on Infinite Earths}, the editorial powers-that-be have brought a new reality into being in the sight of the fans, a brave new world of superhero adventure, free of convoluted history and “infinite Earths,” free of the juvenility and predictability of the “oneiric climate.” Now, the fans who have witnessed this mythic transition are confronted with a choice: either emulate Harbinger’s progressive attitude and accept the new, streamlined DC Universe as the evolutionary advance it is intended to be, or wallow in the past like the Psycho-Pirate, blind to the blessings (mixed though they may be) that the new reality provides. It is on this admonitory note that \textit{Crisis on Infinite Earths} ends.

The Apocalyptic Eighties: \textit{Crisis} as a Myth of Its Time

I feel that I would be remiss if I did not devote at least some small space to discussing the relationship between the \textit{Crisis} text and its historical context in the mid-1980s. Such contextualization is important in any textual analysis of superhero comics, for reasons that Greg McCue explains as follows: “Since comic books are published in periodical form, they are subject to the forces of time and market in ways more immediate than other art forms.... They are, therefore, more likely to use what is at hand and reflect temporary and specific cultural prejudices and attitudes.”\textsuperscript{86} In fact, superhero comics’ close reliance on the ever-changing cultural zeitgeist is one
stated reason for DC Comics’ decision to relaunch their continuity, because said relaunch dissolved the DC Universe’s basis in decades’ worth of dated stories, thus making it easier for DC’s characters to remain relevant to the times. It is only fitting that Crisis on Infinite Earths, the performative gesture through which DC enacted this relaunch, should itself reflect a certain contemporaneity. The cultural atmosphere of the 1980s had a strong influence on the decision to publish Crisis on Infinite Earths, and on the specific structure and themes that the text employs. Although it is probable that, even if DC Comics had not published Crisis on Infinite Earths in the 1980s, they might eventually have decided to take steps to rejuvenate their continuity at a later time, it is a virtual certainty that any such rejuvenation would have taken a very different form.

The mid-1980s saw a creative renaissance in superhero comics, which was already underway when Crisis on Infinite Earths was published. DC Comics had enjoyed commercial success, and even attracted some attention from the mainstream media, thanks to a crop of young, iconoclastic DC writers who had been working to create self-conscious “art” and/or serious social commentary using DC’s superhero characters. Crisis on Infinite Earths could be seen as an attempt by DC Comics to update and enhance the entire DC Universe as a vehicle for popular storytelling, parallel to the young writers’ efforts to “elevate” individual characters and to tap the unexplored artistic possibilities of the superhero genre as a whole. According to Mila Bongco, both of these revisionist movements were informed by a general cultural undercurrent of apocalypticism (of which Crisis, as an apocalyptic text in the most literal sense, is a very direct manifestation):

Although there have been many attempts to make superheroes more multi-dimensional, especially psychologically, since the 1960s, there was a marked difference in the changes in the 1980s.... A connection was apparent between the increased cynicism of the major superheroes and an apocalyptic impulse in mass culture and a certain impotence in dealing with it[.]\(^{87}\)

This “apocalyptic impulse” was a major identifying feature in much of American culture in the mid-1980s; the mere fact that almost every volume of eschatological theory I consulted in researching this thesis happened to be published in 1985 or 1986 (the same years in which the
Crisis series was published) indicates the prominence of apocalypticism in the popular and academic imagination at that time. The roots of 1980s apocalypticism can be summed up as follows:

- a deep uneasiness sometimes verging on panic about the onward rush of technology; about increasing centralization and social control; about the new extremes of poverty and affluence; uneasiness, in short, about humanity’s inability to shape the fate of societies and our own ability to control our individual lives.\(^8^8\)

Other likely sources include late-era Cold War nuclear paranoia and “eco-panic” brought on by escalating concerns about the environment.

One way in which *Crisis on Infinite Earths* reflects 1980s apocalypticism is its stylistic affinity with the depiction of cataclysmic events, mythical and real, in other visual media of the day. Much of the stock imagery of the series, especially the scenes of large panicked crowds fleeing from the anti-matter wall and the images of invading swarms of shadow-demons, owes a debt to the cycle of Hollywood disaster movies of the 1970s and the action thrillers that evolved from them in the 1980s. Taken at face value, this invocation of the filmic is part of a general “cinematic sensibility” that rose to prominence in superhero comics in the 1980s; Jones and Jacobs associate this style, a specialty of *Crisis* artist George Pérez, with the controlled or systematized material excesses of the 1980s in general, as evidenced in the fantastic subject matter and slick production values of the actual movies that comics like *Crisis on Infinite Earths* emulated.\(^8^9\)

There is also a deeper functional connection between *Crisis* and apocalyptic disaster and action films. In *Camera Politica*, their analysis of popular film as sociopolitical metaphor, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner describe these film texts--which they appropriately dub “Crisis Films”--as “hinges between periods of major cultural activity,” created either to celebrate traditional values or to provoke “a progressive attempt to construct new representational codes and social attitudes” (sometimes a single text achieves both effects in ambiguous suspension) in the face of a cultural “legitimacy crisis.”\(^9^0\) Crisis Films “indicate the loss of a certain object constancy, a stability of mental representations which regulate the internal world and which are borrowed or
Crisis on Infinite Earths was designed to address a perceived “legitimacy crisis” concerning the continued viability of DC Comics’ old system of narrative continuity (i.e., the “object constancy” and “representational security” prized by DC’s longtime fans) in a changing comics market, and to dismantle it in a manner both conservative and progressive. As in the Crisis Films, the “transcendent rebirth” of the Crisis comic “required a vision of a fearful and deadly material reality.” When this reality inevitably erupts, a “microcosm” of its inhabitants (i.e., diverse characters from throughout the DC Universe) unite to pursue “corporatist solutions whereby an elite of leaders, usually professionals or technocrats [e.g., the Monitor and Pariah], enable groups of people to survive through coordinated, even obedient action.”

Crisis also owes a visual and thematic debt to television news media. The text is suffused with images of TV reporters providing expository narration, both “live” at various sites and framed in video screens, thus reassuring the reader that this a mediated apocalypse, very much in line with the crucial role that television had in shaping, containing, and rendering comprehensible people’s experience of global-scale cataclysmic occurrences from the time of the Vietnam War. This role of televisual media still exists today, of course, but while modern audiences have become somewhat desensitized to it, in the 1980s it exercised an almost mystical potency that comes across well in the Crisis text. Jones and Jacobs read the symbolic use of televisuality in 1980s superhero comics as “a way to reflect the video-addicted reality of young readers... [and] to bring hyperconscious structure to an essentially visceral form.” They acknowledge this as a particular specialty of Crisis artist George Pérez: “This was Pérez’s mastery: the taming of the beast, the structuring of violence, imagination and young emotion.” The presence of television as a framing device in Crisis not only reflects the intensifying media saturation of the apocalyptic cultural climate in which the text was produced, but it also guides readers in their preferred reception of the text (i.e., not as senseless destruction without meaning or moral, but as a structured and mediated succession from anarchy to salvation for the DC Universe and its continuity).
One important strand of 1980s apocalypticism that has a clear influence on *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is the radical environmentalism of that decade. Ecological discourse was a factor in many areas of American society in the 1980s, its prominence in the public consciousness assured by the constant media attention afforded to problems such as acid rain, mercury poisoning, and global warming, and even if many did not take the idea seriously in practice, man’s ecological self-destruction and/or “nature’s revenge” became a popular bogeyman in 1980s popular culture texts, coinciding neatly with and contributing to the prevailing trend of apocalypticism. On this subject, David Ketterer has the following to say:

A major change in ecological factors, particularly the increase of pollution, right now appears to provide a particularly plausible means by which the biblical Apocalypse may take place.... [T]he notion of an ecological apocalypse enforces the connections... among the biblical Apocalypse, the science-fictional apocalypse, and the value of the concept of a philosophical apocalypse to critical and aesthetic theory. 96

Hence the existential onslaught of “anti-matter” in *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is presaged by a rash of more tangible, traditional signs of the apocalypse in the form of “natural disasters” (volcanoes, cyclones, deluges, etc.) to amplify the general sense of impending catastrophe, on a “biblical” scale, in an evocative and timely fashion. During “the Villain War,” each of the three parallel Earths overrun by super-powered criminals (read: corporate despoilers of the biosphere) face miniature environmental apocalypses of their own; respectively, they are plunged into a second Ice Age, asphyxiated by fast-growing jungle foliage, and ravaged by a monster named “Chemo,” a 100-foot-tall walking chemical spill in a humanoid plastic shell, a definite personification of industrial pollution. A very similar plot point is the Anti-Monitor’s enslavement of the Red Tornado, a heroic crime-fighting android animated by an elemental wind-spirit from outer space. As a perfect fusion of nature and technology with a benign human face, the Red Tornado would seem to be symbolic of the benevolence of industrial progress, which until a relatively short time before the 1980s was virtually unquestioned in America; that in *Crisis* he is ripped apart,
reassembled, and made to serve a world-devouring apocalyptic evil is a sign of how times and attitudes had changed.

Any contextualization of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* should take into account the geopolitical circumstances of the 1980s and the general effect they had on American culture. Drawing on Umberto Eco, Richard Reynolds claims that the state of superhero comics in the mid-1980s was heavily influenced by “the perceived breakdown of Pax Americana” and the beginning of a “new middle ages” near the end of the Cold War, which led to “the recognition that cultural space is permeable, that--unlike the watertight ‘Empire’ --the host culture [i.e., the United States] is subject to influences from outside itself that are beyond its control.” This recognition in turn inspired a mild apocalyptic anxiety or paranoia that found expression in various frenzied attempts at cultural integration, centralization, and homogenization. The increased religious and political fundamentalism of the decade was a part of this. At one time in superhero comics, villains and disasters were portrayed as aberrations in a world of idyllic order, but with the onset of 1980s cultural paranoia, threats to the status quo became a status quo unto themselves within the stories; as a pessimistic depiction of the effects of “outside influences” (viz., the Anti-Monitor) on the DC Universe, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* helped to symbolize this shift to a paradigm of ambiguity and privileged chaos. Also, the reductionist impulse that drove DC Comics to collapse its fabulously diverse storytelling milieu down to a single world and history in 1985-86 parallels that which drove “mainstream” American society to seek strength, security and stability in a cultural “melting pot.”

In the 1980s, the superhero genre, in common with most of American art and culture, “fully entered its postmodern period. Comics creators were inspired to use, recycle and recapitulate cultural themes, motifs and images from both the rich history of comics and the entire cultural spectrum available to them.... reflecting the collage-like essence of contemporary times.” The eclectic form assumed by the apocalyptic events of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is a reflection of this incipient postmodernity, albeit an ambivalent and troubled one. For example, if superhero continuity is “a langue in which each particular story is an utterance,” as Reynolds describes it, then the convoluted, error-riddled mess that DC’s continuity was becoming after fifty years--and,
ultimately, *Crisis* itself, which was engineered to reduce DC’s continuity to literal chaos in order to build it back up again—represents a “breakdown in the signifying chain,” a postmodern characteristic outlined by Fredric Jameson in his essay “Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” The theme of merging in *Crisis*—of conflation, juxtaposition, and hybridization of disparate elements from various parallel Earths and historical periods—is also postmodern, related to the concepts of pastiche and free play of signifiers, as is the compression, disruption, and manipulation of linear time in the story. However, it should be pointed out that since these seemingly postmodern aspects of the text are portrayed as nightmarish, disorienting, and destructive, they might be better interpreted as a conservative, “high-modernist” creative reaction to the rising tide of postmodern aesthetic in the superhero genre, which became ever more prevalent in the years following *Crisis*. Finally, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is aligned with 1980s postmodernity in its strong self-conscious element of metatext, which will be the focus of the final section of this chapter.

**Revisionist Mythology: The Metatextual Aspect of *Crisis***

The self-referentiality of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is not altogether unprecedented. For one thing, while metafiction is unusual or even iconoclastic in some contexts, Jason Craft argues that it is a long-established “emergent property of the system” in shared superhero universes. Furthermore, metafiction is not entirely unknown to apocalypticism either. Inasmuch as it reflects back on an entire mythological tradition from the end-times, all apocalypse myth is bound to be at least partially metatextual; as Kreuziger puts it, “it is story about story.” Apocalypse myth “functions as a kind of recapitulative coda, an often incoherent microcosm of everything preceding it.... Or, alternatively, the promissory aspect of [the mythology] is set in a final, celestial context that presumably vindicates its meaning.” In *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, the “incoherence” of the microcosm (i.e., the hysterical tone and jumbled, byzantine plot structure of the *Crisis* narrative itself) serves a rhetorical function, in that it symbolizes and hyperbolizes the disorder of the old DC
Comics continuity that is being “destroyed” and makes the streamlined order of the “new” DC Universe that is created through Crisis seem more desirable by contrast.

However, what makes Crisis on Infinite Earths unique among apocalypse narratives is its relative lack of an external referent. Since the DC Universe is autonomous, consciously framed as a fictional plane that is distinct from the “real world” (Earth-Prime notwithstanding), an apocalypse there can be both more and less than mere allegory. Rather than forecasting some symbolic fate for “our” universe inspired by existing social conditions, as is the wont of most apocalyptic literature, Crisis literally changed reality for the universe in which it “happened.” Although Crisis did reflect and respond to real conditions in the lives of its audience, these “conditions” refer strictly to the quasi-mythological superhero tradition of which Crisis itself is part, and to readers’ close relationship therewith. Here the apocalypse serves the (commercial) needs of the mythology itself, as understood by its authors and architects at DC Comics, as much as those of its audience. Thus, Crisis on Infinite Earths is distinguished from most other tales of its ilk in that it presents not so much sociopsychological commentary as self-conscious mythological revisionism; where most apocalypse myths can only allegorize desired change, in Crisis the myth-symbol and the change are one and the same, making the Crisis series a bona fide performative utterance in superhero fan culture.

In a sense, what Crisis on Infinite Earths accomplishes is a (meta)mythological meditation on the process of commercial myth-making itself from the sympathetic perspective of the characters, a manifestation of what Jim Collins calls the “hyper-consciousness” of superhero comics, which addresses “the intertextual dimensions of both textual production and textual circulation” within the texts themselves. Most saliently, the story metatextually expresses the superhero genre’s troubled relationship with change. Richard Reynolds points out that although superhero characters are broadly defined as “the protagonists of the myth which is constructed as an intertextual reading of their careers,” they are, on another level, essentially passive and reactionary figures whose primary function is to halt deleterious changes to the status quo precipitated by supervillains, thereby limiting their self-actualization as characters and revealing
them as “masters of their own destiny” only in a very broad sense. This disheartening lack of self-determination is exponentially amplified when one interjects the extratextual reality that superheroes are commercial properties, every aspect of their being beholden to the caprice of writers and the satisfaction of a consumer market. Superhero readers tend to demand that their favorite characters change enough over time to remain interesting and “relevant,” but not so much that they become unrecognizable or lose their iconic “timeless” quality—a very difficult balance to strike, and one that occasionally requires radical concessions.

Taken in sum, it may be postulated that superheroes’ greatest, most primal enemy, textually and metatextually, is change—ironic, given that change is also ultimately necessary to their commercial survival. Crisis on Infinite Earths is a nightmarish expression of this paradox, rendered in terms understandable by both readers and the superhero characters themselves. As a mythologization of superhero storytelling, it plays up “the obvious analogy between serialization and the history of the cosmos itself: ‘later’ events manage to force the revision of earlier ones.”106 In Crisis, the normally transparent, gradual process of mythological revision and reinterpretation is enacted suddenly and violently, with the “revised” subjects fully aware of their violation. The text is something like a vast, catastrophic metaphor for the “genre cycle,” which is itself a metaphor for the fluctuations of popularity experienced by forms of popular fiction (superhero comics included) and the regular changes and reformulations they must undergo in response to these fluctuations. Crisis on Infinite Earths brings DC Comics superheroes closer to awareness of the true nature of their figmentary existence, and of their cruel subjection to this cyclical process of elimination and recreation according to the whims of a fickle public. Although this provides a certain thrill to the Crisis readers in that it proves that, for all their superhuman power, there is at least one force from which even the combined might of all the superheroes in the DC Universe can scarce save themselves (i.e., consumer apathy and the demands of the market, a force with which the readers themselves are intimately connected), the overall effect of the heroes’ vulnerability is one of obvious tragedy—and implicit horror.
The first sign of this existential pathos in the *Crisis* text appears early, during the destruction of Earth-3. Here the Crime Syndicate, two-dimensionally “evil” beings whose sole reason for being (in the thinking of their extratextual creators) is to act out the repressed malice of other, more important characters, become dimly aware of their own extraneity, even as they are canceled out of existence. Like the title characters of Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, they become a Greek chorus to observe and lament their seemingly pointless deaths: “Why?!? Why did the gods [i.e., the writers/artists who created the Crime Syndicate] give us these powers if we can’t use them to save our own lives?”

The ontological anxiety crescendos throughout the text, as characters become increasingly cognizant of the absence of the reliable generic formulae that had guaranteed their safety for decades, and of their resulting mortality (see note 70). Immediately before the history-altering battle at the dawn of time, Uncle Sam--superheroic embodiment of the American patriotic spirit--gives the assembled heroes a “pep talk” in which he reminds them, “Y’see, we’re fightin’ not only for our lives... but for our freedom to think as we do... to act as we do... to be what we want to be.”

The irony of this speech is revealed immediately following the climactic battle, when it becomes apparent that the heroes’ “victory” at the dawn of time actually resulted in an arbitrary restructuring of their personal histories, so that many of them no longer are “what they want to be,” while others simply no longer are. For all their belief in democratic ideals, DC’s superheroes find in *Crisis* that their freedom of self-determination is coextensive with their marketability and with DC editorial policy.

The eleventh chapter of the text is given over almost entirely to exploration of the ontological “identity crises” brought on by the revision of the DC Universe, portraying the emotions of characters who have been retroactively written out of continuity and will soon be forgotten by all (except the fans, of course), their very lives reduced to “imaginary stories.” One might call it “the passion of the retconned” ("retconned" meaning subject to or affected by the *retro*active alteration or negation of established *continuity*; see Chapter 1, note 66). Distraught over the newly established nonexistence of himself and his entire home universe, Superman of Earth-2 attempts suicide (“Let me go! I belong in the *dark!*”); the Huntress, another disenfranchised
Earth-2 native, explicitly wails, “I don’t exist!” This is of course equally true of all superheroes, but it is a hallmark of the uniquely metatextual apocalypticism of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* that only a chosen few are given the dubious privilege of awareness of that fact. Geoff Klock argues persuasively that superheroes’ mythic identities are forged in the fractured “Lacanian mirror” of superhero continuity, and that madness should be the result if the characters become aware of the metatextual “overdetermination and influence” at work in their lives; *Crisis* proves this point by allowing some characters to look into this “Lacanian mirror” and see nothing at all. Eventually, all those characters who have been “retconned” out of DC Universe history either die or disappear, never to return. Harbinger, in a postlude to the main text, states that “they would not be forgotten”, as Jonathan Woodward points out in his annotation of *Crisis*, because “forgotten” is exactly what these characters would shortly become as the “rebooting” of DC Universe history took full effect in the following months, this is “a supremely ironic comment.”

These existential paradoxes help to make *Crisis on Infinite Earths* unique among apocalypse narratives. Martin Day writes that total, unregenerable destruction rarely figures in traditional apocalypse myths—“Such a concept of absolute nullity is late and sophisticated, for the unconscious utterly refuses to conceive of nothingness”—yet in *Crisis* it is presented as a definite possibility, precisely because of the dangerous proximity to “nothingness” in which fictional characters like DC Comics superheroes exist. While most mythic sagas, including some apocalyptic ones, inspire wonder by glorifying their heroic protagonists even in death, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* bizarrely inverts this premise by encouraging readers to accept the retroactive nonexistence of many of its main characters; furthermore, the *Crisis* narrative metatextually contradicts itself by establishing that, as a result of the apocalyptic historical revisions it enacts, most of the early events in the *Crisis* plot itself “never happened” (e.g., the passionate deaths of Earth-3 and the Crime Syndicate could not have taken place because in the revised DC Universe history these characters retroactively “never existed” in the first place). *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is therefore one of very few overtly self-negating apocalypses on record.
While DC Comics’ decision to revise their continuity—and, just as important, the decision to do so abruptly and summarily, in one fell swoop, rather than gradually and unobtrusively as is usually the case when mythological bodies of fiction undergo changes—was motivated by commercial considerations, the decision to construct an apocalypse myth to serve as a performative gesture in the institution of this revision was made as a sympathetic concession to DC Comics’ longtime fans and their communal attachment to continuity, which market-based reasoning alone might not have taken into account. Such consideration for the needs of the audience is a conventional trait of apocalypse narratives both mythical and literary:

At the risk of simplifying, we might say that in addition to telling a story to the reader, apocalyptic tells a story about the reader. Apocalypse does not happen in the reader...; the reader happens into apocalypse.... For the story about the reader is a story of crisis, and the crisis is precisely of the experienced tension of promise and fulfillment, which it will cause and/or resolve.115

In the case of Crisis on Infinite Earths, the “promise” mentioned by Kreuziger in the above quote may refer to DC’s resolution to provide a form of serialized superhero entertainment that would be equally enjoyable by and accessible/marketable to old and new readers. DC’s desire to accommodate devoted older readers is particularly evident in the metatextual aspect of Crisis. Such readers are typically inclined to view superhero characters as something “more than fictional” (which is, indeed, how the characters view themselves), so by explicitly and self-consciously dramatizing the existential anguish of those characters who are doomed to vanish from the DC Universe forever, the Crisis text validates and exorcises/catharts the sorrow and dismay of the fans who are forced to say goodbye to their old favorites, emotions that parallel those of the afflicted characters themselves. In this way, Crisis on Infinite Earths could be said to sympathetically align itself with the “postmodern self-referentiality that is the source of part of readers’ pleasure in comic books,” which Matthew Pustz attributes to the “insularity” of superhero fandom.116 It was concern for these diehard fans that made the production of the Crisis text a necessary step—that made it, as Dick Giordano asserts, “a story that needed telling.”117
In the next chapter, I will evaluate the impact made by the “metamyth” of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* on the comics industry and superhero fandom from the retrospective vantage point of twenty years after the publication of the original text. As we shall see, DC Comics’ “self-conscious cataclysm,” although profoundly influential, did not produce quite the effects that DC Comics had in mind.
III. POST-CRISIS: REPERCUSSIONS OF *CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS* FOR DC COMICS AND THEIR FANS

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

- Isaiah 43:18

This much is certain: once you have the multiverse and its resources, they don’t go away, no matter how you write and rewrite the story....

- Richard Hanley

“Identity Crisis: Time Travel and Metaphysics in the DC Multiverse”

By all accounts, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was far from an unequivocal success. Although it enjoyed very strong sales and became an unforgettable watershed moment for an entire generation of superhero fans, changing the way in which superhero stories are told and the continuity between them recorded, certain flaws in its execution prevented it from meeting the precise expectations of its creators. The series did succeed in performatively reshaping DC Comics continuity and in winning the conditional approval of the fans for this change, but it did not reshape continuity quite as efficiently as hoped, or in quite the way its creators intended. However, I would argue that where *Crisis on Infinite Earths* failed in certain respects, it found unexpected success in others. The focus of this chapter is to chart the aftereffects of the *Crisis* series, for better or worse, on textual production in the superhero comics field, DC Comics in particular, and on superhero fandom. It is not my intention here to pass judgment on whether or not the mid-1980s revision of the DC Universe was “necessary,” “advisable,” “desirable,” or even “moral,” but simply to shed light on why, how, and how well *Crisis on Infinite Earths* accomplished the feat of revision, and to take stock of the consequences.
Almost from the start, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* had difficulty in living up to its own grand design. The original, highly ambitious plan of writer Marv Wolfman was to utterly destroy all aspects of the old DC Universe and redesign it entirely from scratch (i.e., *nothing* that happened in DC Comics prior to *Crisis* would remain a valid part of the new continuity), thus creating “an entirely new DC Universe, full of characters and heroes more representative of the modern world in terms of [ethnic] diversity and [topical] content”;¹ this would have been accompanied by a cancellation and relaunch of all DC Comics series with new “number one” issues, to underscore the totality of the change. However, this was deemed too radical, so what ultimately emerged instead was a comparatively modestly pared-down and spruced-up version of the old continuity, in which only a handful of characters (e.g., Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and several high-profile heroes formerly residing on “parallel Earths”) were significantly altered. These characters were given miniature “apocalypses” all their own outside of the *Crisis* text, Ragnarok-like myths of finality designed to signify the “end” of the outdated versions of the characters in preparation for their new, post-*Crisis* incarnations.

Even with the sweeping reforms of *Crisis* thus reduced to more conservative (but still revolutionary) proportions, problems and provisos arose to compromise its effectiveness. “There were a lot of political problems at the time.... with a lot of the creative and editorial staff, many of whom didn’t realize the world had changed and we either had to evolve or go extinct,” Wolfman recalls.² “Even though I was writer-editor, I couldn’t dictate ninety percent of what went in [the *Crisis* text]. I could come up with a lot, but all the individual editors had to tell me what they wanted done with their characters.”³ Ironically, for an event intended to revise the DC Comics mythology and lend it structure and coherence, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* itself turned out to be loosely structured and incoherent, as a result of being constantly “revised” itself in response to various creator requests, corporate mandates, and logistical realities of publishing. (In fact, *Crisis*
inker Jerry Ordway has been quoted as saying he wasn’t entirely sure Wolfman had complete plots worked out in advance for all of the chapters!  

In the words of DC Comics staff historian John Wells, “The DC Multiverse was dead. And, as with any death, the first reaction was one of denial. In most sectors of the DC superhero line, life continued after Crisis #12 with scarcely a ripple.” The changes wrought by Crisis on Infinite Earths were slow and irregular in taking full effect, with pieces of the new, refashioned continuity trickling in concurrently with residual bits of the old. Obsolete versions of characters such as Superman continued to appear for some months after Crisis had ended. This may be attributable to the nescience or reluctance of individual writers, or it may have been done in order to give longtime readers a transitional “mourning period,” to ease themselves gently into the new mythology that had been thrust upon them. In any case, the lack of immediate and definite uniformity in the presentation of the new continuity undermined the intended authoritative impact of the Crisis series.

To make matters worse, poor communication among DC’s editorial offices and between editors and their writers resulted in a great deal of narrative confusion in the first few months of superhero stories set in the “new” DC Universe following Crisis. Although certain concrete guidelines were provided as to the general shape of the new DC continuity, it was left largely to the discretion of individual creators to decide which pre-Crisis stories and characters remained canonical, and the creators’ interpretations often varied, to the confusion of readers. In the words of Dick Giordano, DC’s editor-in-chief at the time, creators kept getting “caught up in that rich history” for which DC Comics had been famous, and they found it difficult to resist the temptation of reviving decanonized elements from the defunct continuity to “clutter” the new continuity, a “problem” that has only intensified over time. (Some latter-day writers have actually used this post-Crisis continuity recidivism to positive artistic effect, of which I will say more later.)

Worse still, there was major difficulty in determining to what extent the events of Crisis on Infinite Earths were even “remembered” by the characters who took part in it. This was an unusual situation. For one thing, it is rare for apocalypse myths to leave such a full complement of
survivors, or for stories to continue to be told about those survivors in the wake of the apocalypse itself; for another, it is even rarer for a “myth” of any kind to selectively decanonize numerous other tales that preceded it, and rarer still for a myth to declare large portions of its own narrative invalid! Writers were unsure how advisable it was to acknowledge Crisis directly, considering the continuity paradoxes and further reader confusion such allusions might create. “‘The idea of the Crisis was that when issue 12 ended, there would never again be another reference to the Crisis having happened,’ Wolfman says. Nobody was supposed to remember the past, but almost inevitably there were compromises that rendered the change less effective.” For example, if Crisis “never happened,” what would explain the death of the Flash to his numerous fans? It soon became apparent that the Crisis text was too massively influential to be placed outside of canon, but even so it was referenced only obliquely and cautiously in DC Comics stories for years to come. In the myth-making praxis of the DC Universe, it gradually assumed the character of “forbidden lore,” a Pandora’s Box of continuity nightmares, or of “Lacan’s ‘traumatic kernel,’... the event that cannot be symbolized, cannot be brought into the ‘symbolic order’ of the social reality.”

On the whole, Crisis did little to actually “simplify” DC’s continuity, as it created new confusion in place of that which it eliminated. As such, it fulfills a dire prophecy made by Ryan and Kellner:

Conservative cultural or cinematic texts invariably contain a fissure line that troubles the apparently victorious ideology of the text. Ideological antidotes always point out disease even as they try to remedy it or... try to pretend it doesn’t exist. The success of the ideological operation is always a testament to failure[.]

Crisis on Infinite Earths may not have solved DC’s continuity problem exactly, but it did make the comic-book industry and superhero fandom more aware of continuity, and its openness to revision, as an issue. Indeed, there is a case to be made that Crisis did more to publicize, or even “cause,” the "continuity problem" as such than it did to solve it, given that DC Comics staffers themselves appear to have been more inclined than anyone else to construct the state of DC continuity as a “problem” in the first place.
It may not even be too far-fetched to suggest that the reasoning behind *Crisis on Infinite Earths* did not reflect marketing necessity or consideration for new readers so much as it did the personal sentiments of certain parties in DC editorial. In an essay on apocalypticism in marketing (a topic of definite relevance to a highly commercial apocalypse text like *Crisis*), Stephen Brown mentions the intrusion of personal issues into apocalyptic discourse: “In keeping, moreover, with [Frank] Kermode’s (1967) thesis that we project our existential anxieties onto history, it is surely no accident that crisis-mongers... are invariably (c. 40-year-old) men facing the uncertainties of middle life.”

In light of this, it is possible to conceive of *Crisis* as the product of the middle-aged perceptions, desires, and impulses of men like Dick Giordano, who, after spending more than twenty years in the superhero business, began to feel the need to make radical changes for the sake of novelty or to make their mark on the industry as much as for any other reason, thereby making of their “mid-life crises” a *Crisis* for the entire DC Universe. Alternatively, according to D.H. Lawrence, apocalypticism can be “the product of the spiteful wish fulfillment of the underprivileged, an expression of frustrated power lust. Presumably, then, bitterness and a sense of persecution... should characterize the writer of apocalyptic literature.”

This description would seem to fit overworked, burnt-out DC Comics writers (e.g., Marv Wolfman) who had grown resentful of having to take fifty years of continuity into account in their work, and who made their voices heard in the drafting of *Crisis*.

Beyond the continuity problems it created and/or fixed, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was a mixed blessing for DC Comics and the comics industry as a whole in another important way. It spawned an entire subgenre of apocalyptic storytelling in superhero comics, the reality-bending company-wide crossover event, or more simply “megacrossover,” which has become an annual tradition at most major publishers of superhero comics. Usually occurring during the summer months, these multichapter sagas unfold in the pages of numerous comic books, requiring readers to buy multiple issues to read the entire story (a definite commercial incentive for companies to produce as many of these “megacrossovers” as fans will support), and depict huge battles or conflagrations that, as in *Crisis*, require the cooperation of vast throngs of superheroes to resolve.
They often feature dramatic titles that suggest apocalypse (*Millennium, Armageddon 2001*, *Kingdom Come, Final Night*, etc.), and while they rarely bring about absolute retroactive metatextual revision of continuity in the way that *Crisis* did, they almost always create substantial changes to the status quo of the superhero universe in which they occur, mostly in the form of the deaths of key characters. These changes have grown progressively tamer, more conservative and temporary, with each successive crossover “event” since *Crisis*, to the point that many superhero fans have grown cynical as to the sincerity and import of these events.

Such “megacrossovers” can be beneficial in that they reaffirm the scope and all-inclusiveness inherent in the concept of superhero universes, their great potential for intertextual bricolage and far-ranging epic storytelling. However, as Marv Wolfman laments, this particular legacy of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* has its drawbacks as well:

After the astounding success of *Crisis*--which was created only to simplify the DC Universe for new readers--every publisher, even those who were brand-new, jumped on the bandwagon with a company-changing series of their own, whether they needed to “clean house” or not. In many ways, I fear, the annual stunt has taken over comics publishing. If it isn’t big, if heroes don’t die, if worlds don’t die, then, many feel, the stories aren’t worth reading.¹²

Giordano adds to this that most megacrossovers that came after *Crisis*, published by DC and others, were “constructs, rather than [stories] that needed telling.”¹³ The concern here is that *Crisis* has had the same effect on the comics industry that *Star Wars* and its ilk have reputedly had on Hollywood film: that *Crisis* has brought the tyranny of the “blockbuster” to comics, encouraging disproportionate emphasis on huge-scale action and spectacle and on increasingly shallow “apocalyptic” consequences for the characters, often at the expense of more traditional storytelling values. Also, the proliferation of DC Comics crossover stories inspired by *Crisis on Infinite Earths* foregrounds the continuity problems inherent in the new DC Universe that was created through *Crisis*.¹⁴
One of the best ways to assess the importance of a text in a serialized popular medium such as superhero comics is to examine the tributary texts that emerge in its wake. Although the entire “megacrossover” subgenre stands as a (not entirely complimentary) testament to the influence of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, as stated above, there are certain individual texts that more directly and substantively reflect and comment upon the instrumentality of *Crisis* as an apocalypse narrative. The earliest of these were *Who’s Who: The Definitive Directory of the DC Universe* (described at length in my introduction) and *The History of the DC Universe*, both of which were released specifically as companion volumes to the *Crisis* text. Geoff Klock indicates that revisionist approaches to continuity, such as that taken by *Crisis*, can give rise to texts “that can hold back and organize the past, keeping the dead from rising while floating on their inspiration”;¹⁵ the reference volume *Who’s Who* is one such “Book of the Dead,” cataloguing the life histories of most of DC’s characters (including those killed, radically altered, or rendered nonexistent by *Crisis*) and representing them as historical curiosities, as nostalgia aids for devoted fans, and as “inspiration” for future stories. *The History of the DC Universe* is an illustrated chronology of the newly constituted past, present, and future of the post-*Crisis* DC Universe, published by DC in an ultimately insufficient attempt to, in Wolfman’s words, “fully explain all the ramifications of the *Crisis* and... let all DC readers know what’s out there.”¹⁶ The version of DC history presented in this text was meant to be “the definitive history,” and Wolfman rather disingenuously assured fans that “It won’t change.”¹⁷

Another phenomenon that is thematically connected to these two texts is the rash of “Year One” stories, or altered/modernized retellings of the “secret origins” of various superhero characters, that DC published shortly after the end of *Crisis*; in fact, DC launched a comic book entitled *Secret Origins* that was devoted exclusively to such strategic retellings, as a means of “exploring” the revised status of DC’s characters in the new post-*Crisis* continuity. James B. South discusses the perceived importance of origin stories:
“Year One” storylines have as one of their primary goals the fashioning of a stable and canonical origin for a character based on a past that is almost always to some extent unstable. In ignoring any destabilizing stories that may be associated with a character, such comics also provide a kind of truth about the character, at least for the foreseeable future.... The observant lifelong reader sees [the choice made by the writer], notices what is absent from the new canonical narrative, and decides to accept or reject this stabilized reading of the character.18

South goes on to characterize this process as a source of pleasure for readers, and of “stability” for the DC Universe as a whole.

What all of these texts have in common is an ideological preoccupation with the “definitive,” in which respect they are all dedicated to furthering the project of their apocalyptic parent text (i.e., Crisis on Infinite Earths) to collapse the rampant proliferation of DC’s multivocal (and “multiversal”) continuity down to a single, insubversible, “official” thread. While it makes sense from a marketing standpoint, by the standards of several literary commentators this reductive application of apocalypticism would be considered disappointing. “Time in Western consciousness has become a ‘homogeneous continuum that contains no surprises,’” writes Frederick Kreuziger. “Even eternity is emptied of promise, because an evolutionistically softened eschatology denies the possibility of the radically new.”19 Kreuziger puts his faith in apocalyptic popular texts to restore some of this uncharted “promise” through “a de-historicizing of the future,”20 but while Crisis and its complementary texts definitely employed the mythological language of apocalypse to dehistoricize the DC Universe, they did so only in order to immediately rehistoricize it more firmly and restrictively than ever before. The reductive discourse of Crisis also directly contradicts Claude Lévi-Strauss’ declaration that “it cannot be too strongly emphasized that all available variants [of myths] should be taken into account.... There is no one true version of which all others are but copies or distortions. Every version belongs to the myth.”21 Crisis on Infinite Earths, however, as a “metamyth” of the DC Universe, existed precisely to craft “one true version” of the quasi-mythological tradition of which it is part, and to excise all internal variation.
In eschatological terms, texts like *The History of the DC Universe* and *Crisis on Infinite Earths* itself, with their view of history/continuity as something that can be effectively and permanently nullified, transmogrified, or suppressed, express a certain affinity with Homeric “negative eschatology,” which sees death/nonbeing as an absolute impenetrable “Other”:

“Transformed into images of the lives they once lived, the dead are surrendered merely to the timeless fame of song [or back issues].”\(^{22}\) DC’s assumption was that their old continuity could be banished and negated in this manner--consigned to the “underworld,” as it were--leaving DC free to develop their streamlined new post-*Crisis* DC Universe however they wished, without further obligation to the stories of the past. However, this “tabula rasa” mentality was not to last. In fairness to the creative minds of DC Comics who conceived of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, they probably believed that their negatory approach to DC’s mythological heritage was “populist” in that it freed fans and creators from the burden of history (regardless, of course, of whether or not fans and creators wanted to be relieved of this burden), but in practice it put arbitrary limits on the imagination by attempting to dictate which versions of a beloved heroic mythology deserved to be acknowledged as “real.” Elements of the old continuity began to seep into the new, contradictory variants of key stories began to surface, and a brace of DC Comics texts began to appear that took a more “Orphic” view of the continuity divide created by *Crisis*, reminiscent of the continuative or resurrectionist eschatological beliefs of the ancient cult of Orpheus; that is, these texts presume a vital persistence, in some form, of the obsolete or “dead” DC continuity and an indissoluble connectivity between it and the post-*Crisis* DC Universe. After all, one cannot kill an idea; once a myth or concept has been imagined, not even a carefully constructed apocalypse myth will suffice to “unimagine” it.\(^ {23}\)

The most vehement and imaginative of these texts is *Animal Man*, an ongoing superhero series of the late 1980s and early 1990s, written by Grant Morrison. *Animal Man* takes the idea of “the persistence of myth” to radical extremes, in response to the concept (promulgated by *Crisis*) of myth/continuity as a redactable “text” that can be arbitrarily deleted or rewritten with the proper diegetic mediation. Morrison’s position is that once superhero characters have been fleshed out
and rendered believable through the use of detailed continuity, they take on a firm reality of their own and henceforth cannot (or should not) be reduced again to mutable ciphers, subject to alteration at editorial whims. This being so, Morrison’s *Animal Man* work reflects a strong sympathy for the plight of the characters whose lives were altered or stricken from history in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, taking the general theme explored in the eleventh chapter of *Crisis* and expanding it into full-blown surrealist metafiction.

One *Animal Man* storyline in particular presents a very explicit “sequel” to *Crisis on Infinite Earths* in terms of theme and content. The antagonist of this story is the Psycho-Pirate, who, as the only DC character who fully remembers the pre-*Crisis* DC continuity, assumes the role of madman-prophet in the “new” DC Universe, coming to symbolize the taboo marginality of the old continuity and the mischievous transgression involved in the sly references that writers like Morrison often make to it. The Psycho-Pirate discovers that he has the ability to magically “resurrect” characters from the extinct DC “multiverse,” and he attempts to form them into a ghostly army, assuring them, “We can have revenge. *You* can have revenge on the people who killed you. The people who wiped you out. They’re out there *watching*. I know, I’ve *seen* them.... *There!* [points out at the reader] You see them? Leering down.”

In one of the most chilling and poignant moments of the story, Animal Man has an encounter with the version of himself from the pre-*Crisis* continuity, who bemoans the injustice of his consignment to the limbo of nonexistence and his replacement by an “updated” version of himself:

> What happens when the *continuity* changes? What happens to all those lives? *Who’s responsible?* They twist us and torture us. They kill us in our billions. For what? For *entertainment*.... Our lives are not our own. It’s not *fair*. Wasn’t I *good* enough? You’ve taken my place! I’m not *real* anymore! I’m afraid. I’m so *afraid*.25

Whereas, in the subtler metatextuality of *Crisis*, characters only become aware of their own “nonexistence,” in *Animal Man* they also become aware of the entire textual system that contains them (and that rejected them), breaking through panel borders on the comic page and speaking directly to the readers, whom they blame for their removal from continuity. Thus the “passion of
the retconned” of *Crisis* becomes a “return of the repressed.” This is typical of the DC Comics texts that reference and reframe *Crisis* in an “Orphic” sense. *Crisis*, originally an apocalypse myth, has a way of being recast as a ghost story or myth of the underworld in later texts relating to it, creating the thought-provoking impression that the modern DC Universe is built on haunted ground.

Another story that pursues the theme of persistence and/or resurrection of the casualties of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (albeit more optimistically, without the grimly existential tone of *Animal Man*) is *The Kingdom*, written by Mark Waid with creative input from Morrison. *The Kingdom* was published in the late 1990s, at a time when “post-nihilist” creators had begun to think that 1980s apocalypticism, in superhero comics and in culture in general, may have been misguided; that “humanity may have been misreading the symptoms of a possible renaissance as those of civilisation’s doom”; and most particularly, that the apocalyptic changes that *Crisis* enacted in the DC Universe, although perhaps appropriate to the historical context in which they occurred, were in the long term harmful to the creative potential of DC’s continuity and characters. As noted by media critic Douglas Rushkoff, “higher levels of dimensionality are the goal of evolutionary development,” in the popular media as elsewhere, and if this is so, then *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, intended as a progressive measure, might actually constitute an evolutionary step backwards, in that it strips certain “dimensions” away from the DC Universe.

The aim of *The Kingdom* is to restore some of this lost “dimensionality” and take DC’s continuity in a more properly “evolutionary” direction. The story is based around a time-traveling mass-murderer called Gog (a name associated with biblical apocalypticism), who is moving steadily backwards through time from the future, killing Superman in every time period he visits, yet mysteriously not creating any *Crisis*-like “time paradoxes” in the process. While the superheroes of the present day make preparations for Gog’s arrival, they are puzzled by the inexplicable appearance in their midst of the “ghosts” of people and objects from the pre-*Crisis* continuity. When Batman is sent to investigate, readers are treated to an ingenious commentary on the state of post-*Crisis* DC continuity and its shortcomings:
I find that some of the items in question evoke an inexplicable emotional sensation. The closest descriptive assignable would be “nostalgia”—but as these things do not, cannot exist... nostalgia cannot possibly apply to that which cannot be rightfully remembered.  

Batman trails off here when he is confronted with the “ghost” of Batwoman, his ex-lover in the old DC Universe who was erased from reality by Crisis, and is flabbergasted to discover that he recognizes her, despite her “official” nonexistence. Here Batman—exemplar of gritty, no-nonsense pragmatism and rationality, a perfect embodiment of DC’s post-Crisis ethos—stands in for fans and creators who, in Waid’s view, place too high a premium on the canonicity of continuity; who are “vested in enforcing an inflexible view of reality” and who “think orderly, catalogued continuity is preferable to a kingdom of wonder”; and who occupy themselves so much with debating whether or not particular stories “count” that they become blind to the “irrational” escapist pleasures that superhero stories are meant to provide. Batman explores the artifacts of a forgotten age of illogic, wonderment, and simple fun, and in the end, he is sucked in by them, as Waid hopes readers will be too.

After the resurrected people and objects from the old DC Universe help the heroes of the present defeat Gog, it is revealed that the appearance of these “ghosts” and Gog’s failure to disturb the timestream are both related to a single transcendent phenomenon: this is “Hypertime,” a multidimensional model of mythic history that allows for an infinite number of alternate timelines or “continuities” to exist concurrently, even to overlap and influence one another. It was Waid and Morrison’s intent that such a supremely all-inclusive approach to continuity would retroactively establish that every DC Comic ever published, every story that fans had ever read or loved (even the “imaginary stories” of the Silver Age of Comics), “happened” somewhere in Hypertime, even if it is not part of the main linear narrative of the DC Universe; they also hoped that this approach would render the concept of “continuity errors” obsolete, and serve as a reminder that individual stories told about superhero characters “are forever part of a greater legend” that transcends the specificity of history, and are thus not bound to any one “official” or “definitive” narrative
Hypertime-based continuity would theoretically sustain itself “organically,” eliminating the need for close supervision or Crisis-like events to “fix” it, thus freeing fans and creators to simply “enjoy” the stories. However, despite Morrison and Waid’s good intentions, their utopian scheme proved too “evolutionary” for its own good. Few DC writers were willing or able to make effective use of the byzantine Hypertime concept, and while fans found it mildly interesting, too many of them still valued old-fashioned linear continuity (see Chapter 1) for Hypertime to achieve currency. However confusing DC’s continuity may have been for fans before or after Crisis, Hypertime seemed likely to do nothing but make things worse. Therefore DC abandoned the concept shortly after The Kingdom and it has been little mentioned since.

The “new” DC Universe created through Crisis on Infinite Earths has prevailed for twenty years, but it has not done so without periodic maintenance. The diegetic instability and uncertainty that developed during and after the Crisis “reboot” have necessitated a few subsequent attempts to reinforce and improve upon the incomplete (and, perhaps, uncompletable) revisionist history attempted by the original text. The first of these, Zero Hour: Crisis in Time, was published at the tenth anniversary of Crisis on Infinite Earths. The plot concerns a pair of former superheroes who have recently suffered great personal losses (as, indeed, almost every DC character did in the original Crisis), and who turn villainous after obtaining the cosmic power to destroy all of time and rebuild it in their own image. Several heroes die in the ensuing chaos, while others who had already been dead (and even a few who had been rendered nonexistent by Crisis) temporarily pop back into being. The villains are very narrowly thwarted and time is restored, in a slightly altered form; the final issue of the series came packaged with yet another “definitive” timeline of the re-recreated DC Universe, outlining the most recent changes. Although Zero Hour did serve to resolve a few continuity-related “loose ends” left by the original Crisis, the improvements it made were cosmetic, and it raised as many new continuity questions as it resolved. Perhaps more importantly, as a story, it lacked the scope and the sense of apocalyptic viscerality and urgency that made the first Crisis so memorable, and therefore it has not had a lasting impact on DC superhero fandom to match that of its predecessor.
The most recent legacy of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*—so recent that the final issue saw publication less than a month prior to the time of this writing—is *Infinite Crisis*, a text specifically designed to celebrate, reiterate, and (to some extent) invert the effects of the original *Crisis* series on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary. In *Infinite Crisis*, Alex Luthor and the small band of continuity misfits who left the DC Universe at the end of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* return from their exile. Having witnessed the trend toward “grim-and-gritty” realism, excessive violence, and moral ambiguity that became prevalent in the DC Universe in the 1980s and 1990s following *Crisis*, these characters contrive an elaborate plot to unmake the post-*Crisis* DC Universe and recreate it yet again, to erase the sins of the past twenty years and bring reality more into line with proper heroic ideals. Since this plan calls for the “erasure” of billions of lives, however, it itself ironically falls shy of these “heroic ideals.” Herein lies an important distinction between the two “Crises”: both texts are metatextual allegories for processes of revisionist myth-making, but unlike its 1980s predecessor, *Infinite Crisis* presents its apocalyptic restructuring of history/reality/continuity not as some inevitable tragedy or twist of fate beyond the control of its protagonists—not as an invasion of demons from another plane or an unfathomable cosmic disaster—but as an immediate, human ethical issue, an examination of mores and values concerning what reality “should” be like for superheroes, and which methods are condonable in the changing of that reality. It is implied that the values and morals at issue here are actually those of DC Comics’ devoted fans, many of whom had grown critical of the state of affairs in the post-*Crisis* DC Universe, both in terms of continuity irregularities and the increasingly questionable behavior of DC’s superhero characters.

Whereas *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was an unprecedented endeavor designed to take DC Comics in experimental new directions, deemed “necessary” by DC editorial but barely conceivable to anyone else, *Infinite Crisis* is at once a more populist and a more reactionary form of revisionist apocalypse, having been drafted in direct response to widely known and publicly expressed desires of fans. Significantly, the retroactive changes to continuity enacted by *Infinite Crisis* are much more conservative in nature and extent than those of the first *Crisis*: relatively little is actually changed in *Infinite Crisis*, and most of the changes that do occur merely serve to
Infinite Crisis can be seen as the “equal and opposite reaction,” twenty years in the making, to the revolutionary “action” of the first Crisis, the effect being to make the latter seem suddenly less like a true, irreversible “apocalypse” and more like the proverbial “three days in the tomb” for various temporarily obsolete aspects of DC continuity. The apocalyptic process of superhero historicism set in motion in 1985 seems to have come full-circle. Only time will tell where the next “circle” of changes will lead.

The New Cyclicality of the DC Universe

In addition to the simplification of the DC Universe, a secondary objective of the Crisis series was to free DC Comics’ superhero characters from repetitive generic formulae and the stagnation of Eco’s “oneiric climate,” to begin telling their monomythic life histories anew for contemporary times with a new set of conventions, thus infusing the stories with vitality and unpredictability. Following the precedent set by Crisis, superhero stories of the 1980s and afterward strove for tragic melodrama and novelistic “realism” by allowing superheroes to experience traumatic, life-changing events on a regular basis, something that could not happen in the oneiric climate. This was for good reason, however: as the reader may remember, the oneiric climate, while repetitive and (from a certain point of view) unsatisfying as a storytelling device, did at least allow the heroes to remain eternally young, since its “iterative scheme” presented all stories about a particular character as if they took place within the same eternal moment of “mythic time.” When DC’s characters began to have adventures that have long-term repercussions and that unfold progressively in closer approximation to “real time,” they began taking “steps toward death,” in Eco’s terms, since accumulation of life experience is tantamount to aging.32

Although the apocalyptic rebirth of DC Universe history in Crisis on Infinite Earths rendered moot the knotty question of how the superheroes could have existed for fifty years without aging, this was at best a temporary solution. Continuity began to reaccumulate more thickly...
than ever once *Crisis* had ended, but now without the uneventful stability of the oneiric climate to keep the heroes’ lives suspended in time. The proliferation of *Crisis*-inspired “megacrossovers” mentioned above only served to exacerbate this situation by cluttering the heroes’ lives with manufactured “events” and “big changes,” each of which represents a “step toward death” in that they demonstrate irrefutably that some amount of time has passed for the heroes. To make matters still worse, these dramatic “big changes” tend to be produced for short-term shock value, with little consideration given to the difficulty of sustaining a consistent, ongoing macronarrative for a character while incorporating such strange developments. Almost invariably, “big changes” are eventually undone, often requiring many issues’ worth of dense, tortuous, unconvincing storytelling to reverse them, thus convoluting the continuity and taking still more time out of the heroes’ lives. Ironically, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* once again finds itself perpetuating a problem it was designed to solve.

However, although *Crisis* may not have resolved the issues presented by continuity and the abolition of the oneiric climate per se, it did lay the groundwork for what approaches a long-term, “self-sustaining” solution. According to Eco, heroes of ancient myth were often saved from “consumption” by history because they “had the possibility of a continuing rebirth or of symbolizing some vegetative cycle--or at least a certain circularity of events or even of life itself. But Superman is a myth on condition of being a creature immersed in the everyday life of the present[.]”33 Since it has proven impossible for superheroes to exist simultaneously in both “mythic” and “everyday” timeframes, DC Comics simply developed its own version of a “continuing rebirth,” “vegetative cycle,” or “circularity of events,” beginning with the apocalypse myth of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. Originally intended to be a vehicle for the self-reflexive restructuring and rehistoricization of a quasi-mythological tradition, *Crisis* became the first stage in a continuing cycle of renewal, a never-ending “purification ritual,” such as those described by Mircea Eliade in *Cosmos and History* (see Chapter 2).34

The process begun with *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, and continued by subsequent continuity-altering “metamyths” such as *Zero Hour* and *Infinite Crisis*, serves to periodically and selectively
purge the DC Universe of years’ worth of accrued history and sensationalistic continuity embellishment. This allows DC superheroes to grow and change and suffer reversals in the novelistic mode, affording readers all the continually unfolding pleasures of serialized narrative, without fear of either stagnation or “consumption”: whenever too many years of continuity and change have passed, DC Comics may simply institute another “apocalypse” to return their heroes’ sagas to their archetypal beginnings for a fresh start, all while technically observing the sanctity of continuity, so important to many DC Comics readers. The narrative cyclicity produced by this arrangement is essentially an expanded, more differentiable form of Eco’s oneiric climate, the difference being that instead of experiencing the same brief span of “mythic time” over and over again with slight variations, DC superheroes are allowed to experience as much as ten years of “real time” before being returned to the start of the cycle. What all of this reveals, in hindsight, is that the textual reforms of Crisis on Infinite Earths, while problematic as a once-off effort, have the potential to be more effective if performed repeatedly. This new cyclicity may have had additional intellectual benefits for DC readers. According to Eco,

The disintegration of temporality has the function both of quest and of denunciation and tends to furnish the reader with imaginative models capable of making him accept situations of the new science and of reconciling the activity of an imagination accustomed to old schemes with the activity of an intelligence which ventures to hypothesize or describe universes that are not reducible to an image or a scheme.

In other words, a change in the construction of time in a narrative setting such as the DC Universe can encourage the development of new modes of time perception in readers. Ironically, Crisis on Infinite Earths was meant to create a DC Universe that was “reducible to an image or a scheme,” but in seeking such simplicity introduced readers to new complexities.
As I have repeatedly attempted to convey throughout this thesis, superhero fandom is the truest *raison d’etre* of the *Crisis* text. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was conceived and published to performatively and diegetically embody radical changes being made to a body of established lore that was of great cultural importance to the fan community, in order to make the changes more acceptable to the fans and to provide them with closure. The text was the crux-point of what might be called an attempted “New Covenant” between DC Comics and its readers, in which DC urged fans both implicitly (through *Crisis* and similar texts) and explicitly (in “letters from the editor” and other direct extratextual appeals) to accept the revised DC Universe’s “superiority” to the original. Although the success of the changes embodied by *Crisis* may be questionable, fans’ acceptance of the *Crisis* text itself is far less so; the fact that it continues to occupy such a privileged place in the cultural imaginary of fandom is proof of this, to say nothing of the consistently strong commercial sales of reprinted editions of the text.

Interestingly, the principal reason why DC Comics readers seem so fascinated by *Crisis on Infinite Earths* has less to do with its staggering continuity reforms than with basic tonal features of the text itself, mainly its vastly inclusive scope and its unpredictability. “The play between predictability and innovation must account for some of the reading pleasure in [superhero] texts,” and *Crisis* is one of the rare occasions in the history of the genre when innovation truly ran rampant. The idea of a comic-book series featuring appearances by every single character in a company’s catalogue, let alone one in which dozens of those characters died, was inconceivable at one time. More importantly, *Crisis* makes very effective use of readers’ ingrained generic expectations, strategically violating them to create apocalyptic mindscapes of wonder and terror—and, because *Crisis* incorporates not merely superheroes but *every* genre of adventure fiction in the DC Comics line, the reader begins to feel that no corner of the imagination is “safe” from impending doom, and his/her sense of anxiety becomes pandemic and absolute. In short, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* may be the most effective “horror story” ever told through the superhero genre.
For jaded readers in the mid-1980s, the dual sense of chaos and potential it induced left an indelible impression, leading to the current high status of the text.

In the time immediately following *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, DC Comics readers derived a certain amount of pleasure from “exploring” the new continuity, discovering what had changed, which old elements had survived, and how everything fit together. However, the thrill of the new was predictably tempered by a latent sense of nostalgia—nostalgia, curiously enough, for characters that in many cases were still being published: “Mythology allows the hero to appear in different guises and forms and yet remain the hero. Nostalgia contains a sense of loss. So in this particular intersection while the hero is still present, something has been lost.” In other words, *Crisis* and the conceptual barrier it placed between DC’s old and new continuities encouraged nostalgic fan attachments not only to favorite characters, but to favorite historical iterations of a single character. As Ian Gordon explains, “nostalgia is linked to the performance of identity as a set of memory structures or grammar through which individuals ‘invent rhetorical performances of themselves’”; remaining conversant in the pre-*Crisis* continuity in spite of its official “obsolescence” is one way for DC Comics fans to demonstrate their epistemological expertise or cultural capital, and to craft identities for themselves as estimable “old-school fans.” Contrasting the pre- and post-*Crisis* versions of the DC Universe is therefore a perennial source of pleasure for some fans. The differences between the two are often catalogued in fan publications, and foregrounded (even used as a storytelling technique) by comic-book creators who make in-jokes and visual asides in reference to defunct continuity, sometimes even “teasing” longtime readers with the possibility of pre-*Crisis* concepts and characters “coming back.” Pre-*Crisis* nostalgia and the identity performance it entails have also influenced the consuming habits of longtime fans: “By tying popular memory to marketable figures, nostalgia has become a way of owning the past,” and since *Crisis on Infinite Earths* effectively discontinued the history of the old DC Universe, buying back part of that history (in the form of back issues and reprintings of pre-*Crisis* stories) has become particularly desirable for sentimental fans.
“In the first years following Crisis, there had been a reluctance to reference the cosmic event at all, a mix of uncertainty about how the saga had played out in the streamlined DC Universe and fears of confusing the next generation [of readers] with references to parallel Earths.”⁴⁴ The Crisis text had achieved the status of Pandoric “forbidden knowledge,” owing partly to its roots in an obsolete continuum, and partly to the sprawling, impenetrable complexity of the Crisis story itself. Although the recondite nature of Crisis is intimidating to writers, many of whom still carefully avoid mentioning it where possible, for superhero fans it holds a kind of fatal fascination, a cachet of exclusivity. Many are in awe of its reputation but are too intimidated to actually attempt reading it, while those who do read it and profess to understand it often find their cultural capital to increase in the eyes of their peers. In this sense, Crisis on Infinite Earths, as a “myth of apocalypse,” could be said to have become the subject of secondary “myths” of its own within the fan culture. One could even argue that Crisis is regarded as a personified event, taking on a life and character and agency all its own, both in fan circles and within the diegesis of the DC Universe.⁴⁵

The persistent enthusiasm for Crisis on Infinite Earths is not limited to longtime DC Comics fans; it often happens that newer, less initiated readers also take an interest in the text and in DC’s pre-Crisis heritage. This calls into question Marv Wolfman’s chief rationale for the relaunch of DC continuity: “Every generation of comic-book readers deserves to have the comics belong to them, not to their older siblings and parents.”⁴⁶ The idea of “ownership” here is problematic. Even overlooking the fact that there is no reason to assume that old or old-fashioned comic-book stories cannot “belong” to younger readers as well as to their older peers and relatives, there remains the question of whether an editorially mandated continuity “reboot” necessarily causes a superhero universe to “belong” to a young generation who had no direct say in its (re)creation. Whatever benefits, intentional or unintentional, Crisis on Infinite Earths may have created for fandom, one also gets a sense that young readers may have been cheated of a legacy or inheritance, driving an experiential rift between younger and older readers and depleting opportunities for intergenerational bonding in the fan community.
Although *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was born out of consideration for DC fandom’s desire to see the history and continuity of the DC Universe respected even in the throes of its own revision, an ironic possible consequence of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is the recent diminution of concern over continuity among fans. There is, in fact, currently an observable schism in superhero fandom as a whole regarding continuity, between self-described “continuity buffs” who savor the “Apollonian” pleasure of the historical and intertextual dimension of superhero comics, and those readers who ignore or even outright disdain continuity, preferring the “Dionysian” pleasures of escapism, power fantasy, and emotional catharsis that superhero stories also provide. Some “anti-continuity” fans simply see the observance of continuity and its narrative rules as a needless hassle, while others resent it as exclusionary or elitist.47 Geoff Klock even goes so far as to suggest that the emphasis on linear continuity that led to the revision of the DC Universe--“the perspective that saw unwieldy chaos as a bad thing”--is now obsolete, and that ontological and chronological narrative ambiguity should be accepted as “one of the [superhero] genre’s great strengths.”48 *Crisis* may be somewhat responsible for the decline in the perceived importance of continuity, whether by making it seem arbitrary, changeable, or disposable, and therefore less worth keeping track of, or by making it more confusing. In any event, while continuity continues to be an important issue, in the wake of *Crisis* and the revisionist projects that followed, a situation has emerged wherein in many cases “strong work comes to define truth”:49 although in theory all superhero stories set in the same “universe” should automatically receive the same canonical treatment under the auspices of continuity, in practice the “strongest” (i.e., most popular with fans) stories tend to stand a better chance of being canonized and referenced in future stories, while stories that are less exceptional run the risk of being forgotten by fans and creators alike, fading from continuity even without the aid of an “apocalypse.”
CONCLUSION

Where a millenarian viewpoint is secularized, history may be imagined... as a process of transformation without end.

- John R. May

Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel

Nice to know there are some consistent things in this universe, eh, Lois?

- Jimmy Olsen

(Marv Wolfman, Crisis on Infinite Earths #11)

It has been my objective in the writing of this thesis to explicate the phenomenal (and phenomenological) importance of the epic superhero story Crisis on Infinite Earths to the intertextual “fiction network” or “universe” of which it is part and on which it performed revolutionary transformative operations; to the company and industry that administer and profit from this universe; and to the cultural community that has organized itself around and invested itself in this universe and in the perpetuation of its mythological heritage. I believe the impact that this story has had is widespread, deep-seated, and visceral enough to be described in terms of mythology and eschatology, despite the controversialism of applying such concepts to commercial entertainment products such as superhero comics. The importance of Crisis, while long accepted by fans, has typically been undervalued in critical circles. Writing of Alan Moore’s Twilight of the Superheroes, an apocalyptic revisionist text that never even saw publication, Abraham Kawa claims: In many respects, appropriating the mythical motif of a war between god-like beings that does not end the world, but introduces a new age, and using it as a cultural metaphor to describe contemporary society was vastly innovative, having only been attempted in comics by the visionary artist Jack Kirby in his 1970s New Gods series. This is patently inaccurate: what Kawa describes above is almost exactly what Crisis on Infinite Earths accomplished, several years before Moore’s story was conceived, but due to its perceived...
status as a superficial “gimmick,” rather than a meaningful story in a mythical vein, the text almost never gets credit for it.

One reason why this is so may be the fact that *Crisis on Infinite Earths* has acquired a reputation as a “failure,” a misguided effort to structurally and tonally alter DC Comics continuity in ways that some critics suggest is not even possible. Geoff Klock, for example, flatly states that the imposition of any sort of permanent order on superhero continuity is an inherently hopeless, Sisyphean task: “The synthesis or suspension of superhero continuity is always doomed to be arbitrary and temporary as drops in a puddle.” While I would not disagree with those who accuse *Crisis* of failing to realize its creators’ precise intentions, I also feel that these accusations miss the point. As an apocalyptic narrative, the most basic purpose of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was to allegorize a historical transition, a potentially tragic one in the eyes of longtime DC Comics readers, in spectacular epic terms; to get the fans’ attention, capture their imaginations, and guide them psychopomp-style through the changes being made to the “new” DC Universe provided for them. In this much, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* did succeed. Even if the various retroactive historical changes and narrative paradigm shifts that the *Crisis* series tried to encourage did not “stick” in the long term, the fans’ fascination with the story itself remained, and that fascination has continued to influence developments in the comic-book industry and in superhero fandom long after the specific ideological projects initially put forth in *Crisis* have lost credibility.

Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was the construction of an imaginary barrier between old, decanonized, “nonexistent” stories and the modern DC Universe continuity—a narratological “Iron Curtain,” held in place by little more than editorial rhetoric, that eventually engendered an aura of “forbidden knowledge,” of taboo and transgression, around the obsolete continuity. In the increasingly “postmodern” climate of the superhero genre, various writers have been unable to resist playfully violating the continuity taboos put in place after *Crisis*, resulting in some very creative and interesting superhero stories in recent years. The *Crisis* text structured readers’ understanding and expectations of “reality” and its boundaries in superhero comics, courting novelistic “realism” at the expense of part of the old childlike, fantastic mentality
of unlimited possibility that had once defined superhero stories; when later writers began allowing some of the more “colorful” elements of the old, pre-Crisis DC Universe slip back into modern continuity, the subjective sense of “induced wonder” for the readers was both great and pleasurable, as if someone had walled off Oz or Narnia and those walls were suddenly, triumphantly being torn down. The initial apocalyptic historical negation effected by Crisis inadvertently called attention to the potential richness, fluidity, and endurance of comic-book reality, and it inspired others to work to realize that potential.

Mythologist Lars Albinus writes that the renewal of traditions, such as DC continuity, is “a vehicle of authorization as well as resistance,” and that discursive representations of death, oblivion, and apocalypse, such as Crisis, are “of the highest priority on the battleground of legitimization.... concomitant with gaining a performed discursive power over religious discourse.”

Even if the continuity reforms of the Crisis series were ineffective and an unqualified failure (which is not necessarily the case), they did at least help to make readers more cognizant of the value of DC’s mythology in their lives. The dynamic tension that developed in the wake of Crisis between the “authorization” of DC editorial and the “resistance” of fans and creators who, while fascinated by the concept, refuse to wholly accept the absolute “death” of the old DC Universe (or multiverse) has facilitated creative textual production and encouraged a more active dialogue between DC Comics and their readers.

In the words of Geoff Klock,

The irony of Crisis was that its methodology, in simplifying continuity, was used [by later writers] to make superhero comic books all the more complex, convoluted, and rich: any attempt at simplifying continuity into something streamlined, clear, and direct... only results in another layer of continuity.”

Klock also suggests that renewal in superhero comics must derive from “a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity rather than continuity pushed to the level of archetype.” However, I would argue that it is precisely through “pushing continuity to the level of archetype” (i.e., that of the mythological apocalypse) that Crisis on Infinite Earths brings this “dialectic” into being. The
Crisis series, originally conceived as a textual vehicle for a corporate agenda, actually taps into a universal/archetypal process of historical renewal and psychic rejuvenation, and it has opened eyes to myth-making possibilities probably undreamed-of by its architects. Although the chaotic diversity of seventy years of superhero history does persist in fan memory and remains available for appropriation and use by DC Comics writers in spite of its canonical status in linear continuity, Crisis and the “cycle” of apocalyptic texts that it inaugurated help to organize and reorganize, if not truly invalidate, this vast, ever-growing, and fantastically fertile body of heroic lore, fitting it into firm (but always negotiable), delimited, historicized narrative sequences to aid reader comprehension, while leaving the possibility open for periodic creative ruptures in the diegesis, in response to the changing needs and desires of the audience. This new narrative paradigm, a utopian suspension of the demands of myth and history/“realism,” is perhaps the truest legacy of Crisis on Infinite Earth, and it has had a profound influence on the imaginative practices of both readers and creators of superhero comics, at DC Comics and throughout the industry and the genre. For this, at least, Crisis on Infinite Earths deserves to be remembered, studied, and appreciated. Though “worlds will live” and “worlds will die,” Crisis has made it easier for the heroes who inhabit them to live on.
ENDNOTES

Introduction

1. The DC Universe is the quintessential example of what Jason Craft calls “fiction networks,” intertextual narrative matrices that constitute “their own ecologies,” in which “both the complex structure of the unfolding fiction and the ongoing process of fiction-making are simultaneously negotiated.” See Jason Craft, “Comics Universes as Fiction Networks” (conference paper, 2004 PCA/ACA Conference, San Antonio, TX, April 5, 2004), p. 2.

2. Richard Reynolds (1994) and Harold Schechter (1980) are probably the most avid proponents of the idea of superheroes as “mythology”; the present study is indebted to them both.


6. Les Daniels, Superman: The Complete History (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle, 1998), p. 159. This is not an entirely accurate observation, as 1.) not “all” of DC’s characters were significantly changed by the Crisis series, and 2.) it is debatable whether Crisis deserves to be described as a mere “gimmick,” as this thesis will attempt to illustrate.


   http://www.newsarama.com/forums/showthread.php?s=51904a1debe0ee16a63f9a1f3d181035&threadid=43574 (link disabled).


17. Klock, pp. 8-10.

18. Reynolds, p. 53.


Chapter 1


5. Qtd. in Pustz, p. 130.


7. Ibid., p. 127.


9. Jones and Jacobs, p. 16.


11. Jones and Jacobs, p. 83.


14. Daniels identifies “Superboy,” a series documenting the adventures of Superman as a costumed adolescent, as “the first major contradiction in DC’s continuity” (1995, 88), inasmuch as the series went against a long-held truism that Clark Kent had not begun fighting crime until he moved to Metropolis as an adult. Nonetheless, this “error” in continuity evolved into one of the most popular concepts in DC’s history and was quickly adopted as canon, supporting Klock’s theory that “strong work comes to define truth, as narrative continuity is fuzzy at best” (31).

15. Jones and Jacobs, p. 85.


18. Jones and Jacobs, p. 95.


21. Ibid., p. 89.

22. Ibid., p. 95.

23. Ibid., p. 62.


26. Ibid., p. 22.

27. For a more thorough discussion of early Silver Age Flash stories and metatextual interplay between “worlds of different truth-value,” see Jason Craft, “Comics Universes as Fiction Networks” (conference paper, 2004 PCA/ACA Conference, San Antonio, TX, April 5, 2004), pp. 3-6.


29. Reynolds, p. 45.

30. In time, however, enough differences emerged between “Earth-Prime” and reality to show that Earth-Prime was not “our” Earth after all, but yet another fictional parallel Earth, bearing a remarkable similarity to ours (see Gruenwald 7, 69-70n11, 70n12; Ward 1).
Ultimately--and perhaps symbolically, as seen in my second chapter--Earth-Prime was destroyed in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, thus proving its distinctness from “our” reality.

31. Klock, p. 5.
34. Ibid., p. 5.
35. Reynolds, p. 45. Emphasis in original.
36. Ibid., pp. 38-43.
37. Ibid., p. 43.
38. Ibid., p. 47.
39. Ibid., p. 48.
40. Bongco, p. 90.
41. To put the understated ageism of this policy into perspective, it is actually seen as more acceptable for a major character to *die* outright than to grow old.
42. Reynolds, p.44. Certain topical periods, however, are temporal “flashpoints” of such key narrative/thematic importance that they must be treated historically (World War II is by far the best example), thus skewing the aura of mythical “timelessness” surrounding most superheroes, and necessitating various continuity “gimmicks” to explain in detail how heroes who were active during these periods have managed to remain “young.” This is one of the purposes served by DC’s ever-versatile parallel Earths.
44. Reynolds, p. 44.
45. Qtd in Reynolds, p. 45.
Additionally, it is important to note that because comic books are a text-based "mythology," not a performed or bardic one, fans are able to own, re-read, and even memorize the various "myths" in detail. Since concrete evidence of the myths’ “official” plot specifics is available for future reference, these specifics become less fluid than they were in older myths, which varied and evolved with every distinct retelling. This is one reason why continuity was able to become such an important factor in superhero storytelling, when it clearly was not in mythological traditions of the past.

Reynolds sees Superman as “adolescence writ large,” a manifestation of magical thinking and the “fantasy life” that precedes adulthood, a symbol of eternal youth (66). Thus, it follows that he, more than any other character, appears at the center of discussions, such as Eco’s, about cyclicality/suspension/renewal of time in superhero comics.


For example, Eco opines that “[Superman’s] public, for precise psychological reasons, cannot keep together the various moments of a narrative process over the space of several days” (149). I personally know quite a few knowledgeable, perspicacious comics fans who have been reading and “keeping together” Superman’s adventures for years, and who might respectfully disagree with this characterization.

57. Reynolds, p. 45.

58. Comic-book fans often refer to stories that do not relate to larger ongoing storylines and/or that have no lasting impact on characters’ lives as “throwaway stories” or “filler.” This use of terminology that equates such stories with refuse expresses certain fans’ impatience with or contempt for superhero texts that do not fully exploit the possibilities of continuity.

59. Qtd. in Pustz, p. 81.


61. Ibid., pp. 113-14.

62.Jones and Jacobs, p. 65.

63. Ibid., p. 67.


65. Jones and Jacobs, p. 90.

66. One such use that is particularly relevant to a study of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is “retroactive continuity” or “retcon,” a practice and term popularized by Roy Thomas (although Thomas accredits a comics fan whom he once met at a comic convention for suggesting the term; see *All-Star Squadron* #18, DC Comics, Feb. 1983, p. 32). “Retcon” can describe a few different revisionist approaches to continuity, most notably 1.) the retelling of older stories in order to clarify or recontextualize certain events, to add new details, and/or to explain away apparent errors in continuity, and 2.) the retelling (or disavowal) of older stories in a manner that overtly gainsays, overwrites, and decanonizes the original versions. It is possible to understand *Crisis* as a massive-scale retcon of the second kind, necessitated by an eclectic, disorganized, decades-long proliferation of retcons of the first kind.

67. Reynolds, p. 47.


Comic books containing important “turning points” in continuity, such as a character’s first appearance, are regarded as highly valuable collector’s items. Brown’s comments on collecting therefore reveal yet another facet of fandom’s vested interest in the maintenance of continuity: fans want the comics that they read and own to remain “in continuity” for monetary as well as sentimental and status reasons, since in theory a comic book’s resale value may suffer if it slips out of canon.

Longtime fans do not necessarily espouse this attitude out of cliquishness, elitism, or spite, but less-experienced readers sometimes perceive it that way, which may explain the increasing number of comics fans who dislike continuity.
88. Ibid., p. 265.
89. Ibid., p. 267.
92. Qtd. in McCue and Bloom, p. 145.
93. Klock, p. 3.
96. Jones and Jacobs, p. 294.
98. Pustz, p. 71.
100. Craft, p. 7.
101. An interesting side-note: before the final title was chosen, the Crisis series was known by the working titles “Crisis in the DC Universe” and “History of the DC Universe,” both of which reflect the series’ goals of revisionist history and definitive “world-building.” As Jones and Jacobs put it, Crisis “involve[d] just about every hero in the DC universe, just to prove there really was a DC universe” (p. 294; emphasis in original).
102. Jones and Jacobs, pp. 103-4. Jones and Jacobs also cite Star Wars and the attendant “space opera” renaissance of the 1970s as a major influence on some of the “cosmic” elements—scope, grandeur, stellar imagery, macro-level mythologizing—that appeared in many superhero comics of the 1970s and 1980s, and that were very much in evidence in Crisis on Infinite Earths (pp. 222-24).

Chapter 2


2. Ibid., p. xi. Emphasis in original.

3. Ibid., pp. xi-xii.


6. Geoff Klock, How to Read Superhero Comics and Why (New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 19. According to writer Marv Wolfman, the title of the series was not actually chosen for its serendipitous biblical connotations, but “as an homage to the JLA/JSA team-ups of our youth” (“Introduction,” Crisis on Infinite Earths [New York: DC Comics, 1998], p. 6). Wolfman is referring to the series of “crossover” meetings between DC’s premier superhero teams, the Justice League and Justice Society of America, that took place annually throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. These much-beloved stories always had titles
beginning with the word “crisis” (“Crisis on Earth-S,” “Crisis in Tomorrow,” etc.), and they always involved some form of travel between the parallel Earths of DC’s “multiverse.” In eliminating the multiverse and uniting the Justice League and Justice Society (along with hundreds of others) in a last grand shared adventure, Crisis on Infinite Earths represents the spectacular, terminal culmination of this tradition; hence its use of the “Crisis” title convention is appropriate in more ways than one.


10. Martin S. Day, *The Many Meanings of Myth* (Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1984), p. 87. If one were to replace “man” with “fans” and “gods” with “comic-book creators,” this quote would serve as a fair description of the vagaries of continuity in the early decades of superhero comics.

11. Ibid., p. 269.


15. Eliade, p. 36.

16. Ibid., p. 97n2.

17. Ibid., p. 88. Emphasis in original.

18. Day, p. 335. In this same passage Day opines, “Most of these mythic theories about time seem the product of masculine consciousness,” which is rather appropriate given the mostly
male comic-book fan audience for which my apocalyptic subject text, *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, was produced.


20. Frederick A. Kreuziger, *Apocalypse and science fiction: A dialectic of religious and secular soteriologies* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1982), pp. 174-75. Kreuziger makes much of the concept of “promise” as “the factor which specifies crisis as having both a dimension of past-ness and a dimension of future-ness to it” (161), which is certainly true of the *Crisis* at issue here. He also writes, “The crisis which occasions apocalyptic is not disillusionment with the present as an obstacle to the future, but with the present as an obstacle to the promise” (173). DC Comics would almost certainly have had a “future” even if *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and the changes it facilitated had never come to pass, but it would have been a less “promising” future.

21. This term is also Eliade’s (p. 10). The “cosmicization” of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is something like an extreme, pandemic extrapolation of Craft’s idea of continuity as “constructive retrospection” (2); the main difference is that whereas in Craft’s model older stories are continually reframed in the context of recent ones, through *Crisis* older stories were simply nullified en masse, so that newer ones could be spared the burden of history.

22. Ketterer, p. 13. Actually, both outcomes suggested in this quote were realized in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*: the majority of the “old system” of DC Universe continuity was indeed “nullified or destroyed,” but significant chunks of it went unaltered and were incorporated into the “larger design” of the new post-Crisis continuity.


24. Ketterer, p. 94.


27. Saul Friedländer, “Introduction,” in *Visions of Apocalypse: End or Rebirth?*, p. 7. Rhodes arrives at this formula after examining the similarities between apocalypse myths and prophecies of antiquity and apocalyptic discourses of recent times, especially Nazi ideology of “the Thousand Year Reich.”


29. Ibid., p. 73.


31. A prime example: “The universe once divided into many parts... each one different, independent, yet somehow weaker than the whole. Now each part suffers for that weakness... destroyed one after the other... because the very fabric of their being is too weak for the total defense” (22).

32. The visual effect of buildings, cars, trees, and human bodies crumbling slightly before disappearing altogether as they make contact with the tip of the energy wave is referred to in the text as “the fraying,” an adequate metaphor for the gradual deterioration of DC’s continuity (Wolfman and Pérez, p. 67).


34. Eliade, p. 59.

35. Wolfman and Pérez, p. 117. One begins to imagine that writer Marv Wolfman may have included this character as an expression of Wolfman’s buried remorse at his own complicity in the “destruction” of the old DC Universe.

36. Ibid., p. 13.

37. Ibid., p. 17. The speaker is Ultraman, the criminal Earth-3 version of Superman.

38. Klock, pp. 20-1.


42. Wolfman and Pérez, pp. 49-51. The specter of the Flash reappears several times throughout the text, becoming yet another in a catalogue of symbolic portents of doom that help to identify *Crisis on Infinite Earths* as a self-conscious apocalypse narrative.

43. Ibid., p. 85.

44. Ibid., p. 153.


46. Ibid., p. 8.

47. One common criticism expressed by both fans and scholars about *Crisis on Infinite Earths* --that the level of characterization, of characters both old and new, is shallow, flat, or altogether absent--comes as a consequence of privileging the “system” over the characters that inhabit it. However, Ketterer suggests that in apocalypse narratives this is a common, if not inevitable, trade-off: as a “literature of ideas,” “apocalyptic literature involves a certain magnitude or breadth of vision which militates against an interest in detailed characterization” (13).


49. Ibid., p. 54.


51. Wolfman and Pérez, p. 125. This explanation is given by the late Monitor himself, in a prerecorded message.
52. Craft, p. 7.

53. Eliade, p. 62. This trope of resurrection applies not only to the historical characters who emerge in the present during *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, but to the possibility opened by *Crisis*, though not yet articulated at this point in the text, for contemporary characters that have died before or during *Crisis* to reemerge in a new, “enduring and concrete” form once the series has ended, to “appear again for the first time” in the revised, “rebooted” DC Universe timeline that *Crisis* will create.

54. Qtd. in Eliade, p. 127.

55. The name “Anti-Monitor” was originally just a “placeholder,” a working name used by writer Marv Wolfman and his editors to describe the character’s nature and function until a better name could be chosen, but when no better name emerged, the “working name” became an official part of the text. The creative team was never happy with the name “Anti-Monitor,” but it is appropriate to the character in more ways than one (e.g., it suggests *negation*, which is his purpose in life), and it has a ring of inhuman menace that seemed to “click” with readers. See *Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Compendium (Absolute Crisis, vol. 2)* (New York: DC Comics, 2005), p. 9.


57. Schechter, p. 68.

58. Ibid., p. 78. For an exhaustive discussion of the trickster archetype and its many different manifestations in superhero comics, see Adam Murdough, "Heroes, Villains and Fools: Mythological Trickster Figures in American Superhero Comics" (B.A. thesis, English, Pennsylvania State University, 2001); the section on "Frighteners" is especially relevant to tricksterish emotional manipulators like Psycho-Pirate.

59. Psycho-Pirate first appeared in *Showcase* #56 ("Perils of the Psycho-Pirate"), 1965. His opponents were Dr. Fate and Hourman of the Justice Society. He has the distinction of being one of the first “new” characters to be explicitly identified as a native of Earth-2;
prior to his introduction, Earth-2 was home only to preexisting heroes and villains from DC Comics of the 1930s and 1940s.

60. Wolfman and Pérez, p. 65.
61. Eliade, pp. 12, 126.
62. Qward is Oa’s only duplicate--Oa has no counterpart in any of the positive-matter parallel universes--thus strengthening the argument for Oa’s exceptionality as axis mundi, juncture of heaven and hell (or in this case, matter and anti-matter). For the record, the universe containing Oa was the same that contained Earth-1, the setting for virtually all of DC’s profitable “mainstream” superhero comics since the late 1950s.

63. Schechter, p. 38. A key distinction: Schechter stresses the necessity of reconciliation and/or reintegration with the “shadow,” but the ideological absolutism of Crisis on Infinite Earths (and arguably of 1980s popular culture in general) does not allow for any such possibility. Here, “self” and “shadow,” like matter and anti-matter, cannot “integrate” without explosively negating each other. Instead, the “self” (i.e., DC’s multiverse) consolidates itself to keep the “shadow” at bay.

64. Wolfman and Pérez, p. 185.
65. An alternate interpretation: Harbinger and Pariah both represent the fan perspective, which would suggest that the fans themselves somehow share the responsibility for the fate of the old continuity (as represented by the Monitor and his multiverse).

66. There is a certain consonance between Pariah and the Monitor: both are cosmic voyeurs, given to observation rather than action, and both have an intimate personal connection to the cataclysmic events of Crisis on Infinite Earths. The key difference is that the Monitor has chosen this role for himself, but forced it upon Pariah. When Pariah first learns of the Monitor’s activities (including his responsibility for Pariah’s “curse,” which the Monitor insists is for “a greater good”), he is appalled: “I should kill you for what you’ve done! And you--you’re sick! Watching all those people futilely fighting for their very survival” (Wolfman/ Pérez 113). One cannot help but hear in this accusation a veiled jab at the
readers, who have also been “watching.” There is a certain element of voyeurism implicit in all visual media, and *Crisis on Infinite Earths* subtly and occasionally pierces the fourth wall to remind readers that the devastation and suffering depicted in *Crisis* is technically intended for their benefit.

68. Schechter, pp. 145, 152.
70. An excellent example of this desperate soul-searching in the face of the “new rules” of *Crisis* comes from Batgirl, one of DC’s more ingenuous superhero characters:

“I’ve faced death so often because I never truly believed I would die. But now--now I feel so useless, so helpless, so worthless--and so very, very scared.”

(Wolfman/Pérez 97)

Another example is this distraught exchange between Firestorm and the Ray:

“Y’know, till now I’ve sorta treated everything in my life as a game... but I’m scared now... really scared.”

“Firestorm... I think we all are. None of us know if we’re going to make it out of this crisis alive.” (199)

71. Wolfman and Pérez, p. 193. The “Moses” imagery is another thematic similarity between Alex Luthor and Superman.

72. Marv Wolfman, “Introduction,” in *Crisis on Infinite Earths (Hardcover Edition)* (New York: DC Comics, 1998), p. 7. A noteworthy irony is that Supergirl perished in the *Crisis* text as a result of striving to live up to her legendary cousin’s ideal of heroic self-sacrifice, while extratextually, her death was decreed by DC editorial because her generic similarity to Superman was seen to detract from the latter’s monolithic “uniqueness.” In either case, Supergirl ceased to exist simply because she was “too much like” Superman.

73. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* began with a story that Marv Wolfman envisioned as a child: a straightforward, massive brawl between every single hero and villain in the DC Universe,
instigated by a shadowy master manipulator (“The Librarian,” who evolved into the benevolent “Monitor” years later). The Villain War is Wolfman’s way of incorporating his original plot idea into the Crisis story, thereby making his simple childhood dream—and that of many hundreds of other DC Comics fans, no doubt—come true. See Wolfman, “Introduction,” p. 5.

74. Wolfman and Pérez, p. 21.

75. One of DC’s most successful series post-Crisis was Suicide Squad, a comic book about a team of semi-reformed supervillains who went on extremely dangerous “mercy missions” for the US government, in exchange for reduced criminal sentences. This series made it a point to portray “villains” sympathetically.


77. Ibid., p. 295.

78. Ibid., p. 297.

79. For an intelligent and thorough consideration of the ontological implications of this aspect of the Crisis story, see Richard Hanley, “Identity Crisis: Time Travel and Metaphysics in the DC Multiverse,” in Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way, ed. Tom Morris and Matt Morris (Chicago: Open Court, 2005). Hanley sounds off on the physical and philosophical untenability of the retroactive time alteration on which the dénouements of Crisis on Infinite Earths hinge, stating, “But there are clear constraints on time travel. Probably the best known is that you can’t change the past” (241). Hanley implies that in addition to the overt apocalypticism of the text, there is another layer of “myth” to Crisis--a “utopian dimension,” as Wolf-Meyer might call it--in that it is a willful fantasy of revisionist history, of man’s impossible desire to exploit the fluidity of time.

80. Eliade, p. 59.

81. Qtd. in Eliade, pp. 120-1.

83. Wolfman and Pérez, p. 359-60.

84. Ibid., p. 363. Second ellipsis added.

85. Ibid., p.364. First ellipsis added. The fourth wall is subtly breached in this passage. The “worlds lived, worlds died” remark derives from a slogan used in print ads promoting the *Crisis* series. Also, the Psycho-Pirate delivers his speech while *alone* in his cell, gazing directly outward at the reader all the while, thus strongly suggesting that he has gained metatextual awareness and is addressing himself directly to the reader.


88. Saul Friedländer, “Introduction,” in *Visions of Apocalypse: End or Rebirth?*, p. 6. The apocalyptic metaphors of *Crisis on Infinite Earths* certainly would seem to fit this description: the merging of universes and timelines is a kind of “centralization,” while the calling into question of people’s “control over their own lives” is painfully (if metatextually) appropriate for fictional superhero characters who find they are vulnerable to having their very life histories revised or deleted out from under them.

89. “Reagan-era Americans were encouraged to let their libidos, their cutthroat individualism, their hubris rise to the top, but to channel them toward puffing up the economy.... In comics, what the superheroes *did* got bigger and bigger, but how they *looked* got tighter and tighter.” Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes* (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1997), p. 242.


91. Ibid., p. 49.
92. Ibid., pp. 64-5.
93. Ibid., p. 55.
94. Ibid., p. 52. As a media product, the Crisis series itself is a “corporatist solution” to some of DC Comics’ self-diagnosed internal problems.
95. Jones and Jacobs, p. 242. Interestingly, during a lull in the action of the Crisis plot, Superman of Earth-2 notes how calmly the people of the five Earths seem to be taking the chaos around them, remarking, “the Monitor must be responsible” Wolfman and Pérez 135). This could be taken as an oblique reference to the power of television (i.e., “the monitor”) to placate the masses in times of crisis.
96. Ketterer, p. 17n5.
97. Reynolds, pp. 82-3.
100. Frank Kermode, in his essay “Apocalypse and the Modern,” discusses “anachronies” (a term he borrows from Gérard Genette)--or “interruptions of ordinary chronological sequence,” the likes of which abound in Crisis on Infinite Earths--as symptomatic of modernist expressions of apocalypticism. (Perhaps if Crisis were more blasé and ironic about its own temporal transgressions, it would qualify more positively as postmodern.) In Friedländer et al., p. 101.
101. Craft, p. 12. Emphasis in original. In making a case for its conduciveness to metafiction, Craft describes the DC Universe as “a persistent system with its own states of internal dialogue or feedback, its own mechanisms for representing its history and complexity [of which Crisis is one of the most important], its own potentiality for intertextual crossover, and its own physics” (11).
104. Qtd. in Craft, p. 11.
105. Reynolds, pp. 50-2.
106. Hanley, p. 242. Hanley is making oblique reference here to “retroactive continuity,” a fan-favorite (and fan-coined) concept. Not only is Crisis on Infinite Earths the hugest, most sweepingly influential and irreversible “retcon” in superhero comics history, it is arguably a mythologized metaphor for the very idea of the “retcon.” See Chapter 1, note 66.
107. Wolfman and Pérez, p. 15. The speaker is Owlman, the “evil” Batman. It is appropriate that Earth-3’s version of “the world’s greatest detective” would begin to deduce the true (fictional) nature of his own existence.
108. Ibid., p. 283.
109. Ibid., p. 304.
110. Ibid., p. 309.
111. Klock, p. 55.
112. Ibid., p. 362.
Chapter 3


2. Qtd. in Brady.

3. Qtd. in Les Daniels, *DC Comics: Sixty Years of the World's Favorite Comic Book Heroes* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1995), p. 188. One example of a “political” issue that arose in relation to *Crisis* involves a fan-favorite character called Power Girl. The cousin of the Superman of Earth-2, Power Girl was essentially a derivative carbon copy of Supergirl, and since Supergirl herself died in *Crisis* and was subsequently erased from the continuity, it would seem appropriate that her parallel-Earth doppelgänger also suffer a similar fate. However, because Power Girl was a personal favorite of then-editor Paul Kupperberg, she was granted special dispensation; rather than dying or disappearing from history, Power Girl was given a new origin that denied any association with the taboo subject of “parallel Earths.” This demonstrates how personal/editorial machinations occasionally overruled the symbolic myth-logic of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, thereby compromising its project of apocalyptic renewal of DC Comics history.


5. Ibid., p. 87.


Crisis on Infinite Earths truly is a “conservative text” is open to debate, since it was produced with a more-or-less progressive intent.


14. Jones and Jacobs argue that the crossovers presented by DC’s rival, Marvel Comics, “invariably proved more successful because the Marvel Universe could support them far more coherently. Even if the crossover itself was overlong, predictable, and messy, Marvel’s continuity always seemed to gain in texture and coherence. DC’s only got more confused.” Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs, The Comic Book Heroes (Rocklin, CA: Prima, 1997), p. 327. An interesting subject for future investigation might be the differences--historical, ideological, atmospheric, or otherwise--between Marvel and DC that make the latter so much more dependent on metatextual mediation to keep their continuity viable.


20. Ibid., p. 217.


23. "The privilege of the [Orphic] initiate was to behold the divine condition of continuity, namely that nothing simply disappears" (Albinus 199). *Crisis on Infinite Earths* attempted to challenge this sacred guarantee, but the deep-seated devotion of certain fans and creators ("initiates") to the old pre-*Crisis* ways has ensured that decanonized superhero stories continue to be influential, in spite of their official "nonexistence" in continuity.


25. Ibid., pp. 39-40. Ellipsis added. All emphases in original.


27. Qtd. in Kawa, p. 222.


30. Ibid., p. 36.

31. The mythologization of continuity in *Infinite Crisis* is a bit more transparent and less sophisticated than that of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. One notable conceit is the attempt to explain all errors, inconsistencies, infelicities, and abrogations in DC continuity during the twenty years since the original *Crisis* as the result of Superboy of Earth-Prime “punching the wall between dimensions” and causing disturbances in the fabric of time in his attempt to reenter the DC Universe. This is reminiscent of primitive explanatory myths of various cultures that develop around mysterious natural phenomena such as thunder and earthquakes.


33. Ibid., p. 150.

34. Interestingly, while Eco takes the position that history corrupts or “consumes” myth, Eliade makes just the opposite case: “historicity does not long resist the corrosive action of mythicization. The historical event in itself, however important, does not remain in the popular memory,” which “refuses to preserve the personal, historical elements of a hero’s biography.” *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and its sequels create and maintain a sort of homeostatic balance between the demands of myth and history in the fictional world of DC Comics. Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Garland, 1985), pp. 42, 46.

35. A model for the post-*Crisis* DC Universe’s cyclical structure can be found in Hindu eschatology, which holds that the universe dies and is reborn in a cycle called a “Mahayuga,” divisible into stages called “yugas.” The last of these, the end-time or “Kali Yuga,” is said to be marked by “continuous decadence upon all planes” and is regarded as “an age of darkness.” It is terminated by a “Pralaya” (“dissolution”) or,
every 1,000 cycles, a “Mahapralaya” (“great dissolution”) (Eliade 113-14). An “apocalypse” such as Crisis on Infinite Earths would correspond to a Mahapralaya. The length of the average “Mahayuga” in the DC Universe would seem to be about twenty years, and the cultural pessimism expressed in the “age of darkness” concept is clearly visible in Infinite Crisis, published at the end of the twenty-year period between Crisis on Infinite Earths and the present.

37. See Hanley (2005) for a complex discussion of five- and six-dimensional chronology inspired by Crisis on Infinite Earths.
39. Klock writes that “horror is the superhero narrative’s diametric opposite: the former portrays the terror of helplessness, while the latter describes a power fantasy par excellence” (74). I would argue that one of the greatest strengths of the Crisis text is its unification of generic “opposites.” This inversion of symbolic “laws of nature” is a hallmark of effective apocalypticism.
41. Ibid., p. 179. Gordon is drawing on Greg Dickinson in this quote.
42. Ibid., p. 192.
43. Jones and Jacobs misanalyze this aspect of the Crisis phenomenon when they claim that a “fatal flaw” of Crisis as a concept is that it would “invalidate all of DC’s past comics, leaving Marvel as the only company with a history available in reprint and back issues” (294). If anything, “invalidation” of stories in continuity terms tends to make them more appealing as historical oddities and collector’s items.
44. Compendium, p. 91.
45. In the character dialogue of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, even though there is known to be a definite antagonist (i.e., the Anti-Monitor) behind the cosmic destruction, it is frequently attributed not to him, but simply to “the crisis” itself. *Crisis* seems to assume the aspect of a personified “force of nature,” comparable to the real-life practice of naming hurricanes and tropical storms.


47. I should acknowledge here that *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, while a contributing factor, is almost certainly not the sole cause of this shift in sentiment. In the twenty years since *Crisis*, the notorious “conservatism” of the fan community--of which concern for continuity is a manifestation, as alluded to elsewhere in this text--has waned considerably. Superhero fandom has seen an influx of liberal thinkers, many of whom have embraced superhero comics as a form of low-cultural populist “resistance” or rebellion against an elitist mainstream; other newer readers are simply drawn to the violence and spectacle of superheroes and care nothing for their history or historicity, a trend that actually began shortly before *Crisis* was published.

48. Klock, p. 24. The failure of the “Hypertime” concept shows that most fans and creators of superhero comics are as yet unwilling to agree with Klock on this point.

49. Ibid., p. 31.

Conclusion

1. Thanks to John Woodward’s “Annotated Crisis” Web site for bringing this quote to my attention.


6. Ibid., p. 10.


