ABSTRACT

FROM INDOCTRINATION TO HETEROGLOSSIA:
THE CHANGING RHETORICAL FUNCTION
OF THE COMIC BOOK SUPERHERO

by Andrew A. Ehritz

This project is an examination of the history of the comic book superhero figure and his/her rhetorical function, and pays particular attention to the political rhetoric in the post 911 comic book. I argue that a shift has taken place in recent years and that the comic book superhero, once primarily a vehicle for idealized morality and patriotic propaganda, has become a major tool for negotiating the ambivalence of social experience. This paper originally included a variety of images. They have been removed in order to eliminate copyright problems. A degree of loss in coherence is the result of this elimination.
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Introduction

This project is primarily about the rhetorical function of the comic book superhero. Although the comic books of early years operated as either escapist fantasy or tools of ideological indoctrination, new titles are wonderfully complex, engaging in sophisticated examination of current social and political issues. Much of my motive for what follows can be found in my love for the medium. However, the full inspiration for this enterprise is the result of the coming together of two of my personal interests, comic books and politics. My frustration with the inadequacy of political debate became projected on to my reading of comics and graphic novels. Therefore, in order to fully understand the perspective that frames this enterprise, I must devote some space to the current political climate of the mass media.

I’m a fan of politics. Over the last decade, I’ve become increasingly interested in the struggles to govern, the battle over policy and law. I suppose that in many ways, politics have helped me discover my personal identity. When I first dabbled in the political arena, I did what most young adults do; I adopted the sensibilities of my parents. Both my father and mother are middle-class Republicans, so I decided that I would also align myself with the right wing of the system. I really didn’t know how to begin, but I felt that I needed to do something to make my declaration of involvement more than a token gesture, so I began to watch politically motivated television. I’m embarrassed to admit this now, but I began my involvement in politics by watching Rush Limbaugh’s early 1990s television show.

It didn’t take me long to discover problems in Limbaugh’s reasoning and perspective. Besides the problems in his logic, I began to feel like his absolutist view of the world did not include me. I was not affluent. I was a young, working man struggling to make a difficult marriage work and having trouble managing debt on a restaurant manager’s salary. A part of me wanted to be a member of this elite club that Limbaugh seemed to belong to. However, I was increasingly unable to reconcile my emerging personal convictions with the belief system that Limbaugh seemed to imply I must share in order to belong to the Republican party. I soon began to call myself a Democrat.

I made a much better Democrat than Republican. Left wing policy, although far from perfect, felt more inclusive and tolerant and, despite my curmudgeonly professions of misanthropy, deep down I was a progressive guy who identified more with the
struggling lower class than with the affluent elite. So for a time I threw myself into my new political role with single-minded conviction. As far as I was concerned, Democrats could do no wrong, and Republicans were nothing more than bigoted, sexist elitists determined to preserve their own entitlement at the expense of everyone else, myself included. Although this phase of my political consciousness was a more comfortable one to maintain, it too would not last. I would once again begin to have doubts and personal dilemmas to reconcile.

It was hard to be a Democrat in the 1990’s without deifying Bill Clinton. Regardless of how they personally feel about the man and his administration, most would admit that Clinton was charismatic and charming. On the other hand, I found myself dissatisfied with his performance. His administration gave individual states the ability to set the rules for welfare, meaning that citizens in conservative regions would be at the mercy of the state without the reassurance of standardized policy. Clinton was also responsible for NAFTA, a trade agreement that relocated a good deal of industry to sites outside national borders, causing many Americans to lose jobs while greedy corporations exploited the working classes of lesser developed nations. His administration intervened in Kosovo, ostensibly acting to combat genocide, yet in 1998 they bombed the El Shifa Pharmaceutical factory in Sudan on the pretense that the facility was manufacturing chemical weapons, a claim later proved false. I’ll not say that Clinton was a bad president. However, he was hardly the saint the left seemed to see and embrace. Partisan politics, on both sides of the divide seemed too eager to over generalize and commit to the party line uncritically.

I’ve watched this trend grow over the years and I haven’t been alone in my frustration. On October 15, 2004 comedian and host of The Daily Show, Jon Stewart appeared as a guest on the CNN show Crossfire. This was a program on the pioneering cable news network that professed to engage in debate between conflicting political opinions. Tucker Carlson, one of the show’s regular contributors attempted to challenge Stewart about his interview with then presidential candidate, John Kerry. Kerry had appeared on The Daily Show and Stewart, commonly perceived as a satirist and pop culture hero, had kept the interview somewhat light. Tucker Carlson attempted to criticize this, claiming that Stewart had missed an opportunity to rigorously interrogate the candidate. The following portion of the show’s transcript is taken from cnn.com and is
presented without significant alterations. The only changes that have been made are the eliminations of transcribed audience reactions.

STEWART: But my point is this. If your idea of confronting me is that I don't ask hard-hitting enough news questions, we're in bad shape, fellows.
CARLSON: We're here to love you, not confront you.
CARLSON: We're here to be nice.
STEWART: No, no, no, but what I'm saying is this. I'm not. I'm here to confront you, because we need help from the media and they're hurting us. And it's -- the idea is...
BEGALA: Let me get this straight. If the indictment is -- if the indictment is -- and I have seen you say this -- that...
STEWART: Yes.
BEGALA: And that CROSSFIRE reduces everything, as I said in the intro, to left, right, black, white.
STEWART: Yes.
BEGALA: Well, it's because, see, we're a debate show.
STEWART: No, no, no, no, that would be great.
BEGALA: It's like saying The Weather Channel reduces everything to a storm front.
STEWART: I would love to see a debate show.
BEGALA: We're 30 minutes in a 24-hour day where we have each side on, as best we can get them, and have them fight it out.
STEWART: No, no, no, no, that would be great. To do a debate would be great. But that's like saying pro wrestling is a show about athletic competition.
CARLSON: Jon, Jon, Jon, I'm sorry. I think you're a good comedian. I think your lectures are boring.
STEWART: Yes.
CARLSON: Let me ask you a question on the news.
STEWART: Now, this is theater. It's obvious. How old are you?
CARLSON: Thirty-five.
STEWART: And you wear a bow tie.
CARLSON: Yes, I do. I do.
STEWART: So this is...
CARLSON: I know. I know. I know. You're a...
STEWART: So this is theater.
CARLSON: Now, let me just...
CARLSON: Now, come on.
STEWART: Now, listen, I'm not suggesting that you're not a smart guy, because those are not easy to tie.
CARLSON: They're difficult.
STEWART: But the thing is that this -- you're doing theater, when you should be doing debate, which would be great.
BEGALA: We do, do...
STEWART: It's not honest. What you do is not honest. What you do is partisan hackery.

Watch the video here
Read the complete transcript here.

This portion of the transcript reveals a frustration that the mainstream news media are doing an inadequate job processing and presenting the complex state of affairs. Jon Stewart was only being mildly humorous on this show. For the most part, his opinions were genuine and serious and these sentiments were exactly what had been feeding my personal political frustration. The two party system seems to have invaded the mass media. Television networks and programming now feel like party members instead of public vehicles for organizing and evaluating common experience. George Lakoff comments on this in the preface to the second edition of *Moral Politics: How Conservative and Liberals Think*.

Lakoff writes that “the division is played out on issue after issue at all levels of government and in every form of media” (ix). According to Lakoff, politics is increasingly becoming a contest between two worldviews. In his book, he asserts that both major political parties employ conceptual metaphors (ideas of the political state as a family) to encapsulate their priorities and agendas. Conservatives employ a model of government as authoritarian parent. Liberals prefer to cast government in the mold of nurturing parent (13). Lakoff makes it clear that these conceptual models are not completely prescriptive and that there are, in fact, numerous variations of these central models.
Although he asserts that contemporary politics is becoming increasingly, rigidly bi-partisan, Lakoff makes an important distinction between the individual and the political party. He writes that not all citizens have coherent ideologies. Far from it. Indeed, one of the most important results of the study of conceptual systems is that they are not internally consistent. It is normal for people to operate with multiple models in various domains… [but] the models described here are those of strict conservatives and strict liberals. In short, the models define coherent ideologies. What conservative and liberal political leaders and idealogues do is try to get voters to become coherent in their views-to move to one pole or the other, that is, to be entirely liberal or entirely conservative over the full range of issues (14-16).

Jon Stewart has a tremendous following because he gives voice to frustration. The average citizen does not have access to Tucker Carlson, but Stewart does. The charges he made on Crossfire align precisely with the ideas expressed in the Lakoff quote above. Television media are too often functioning as partisan ideologues. Rather than engage in meaningful dialogue about social issues and experience, they attempt to push readers to declare faithful allegiance to a particular party. The result is that a portion of political discussions are forced elsewhere, often to popular culture sites. Participatory websites like Jib Jab allow users to exercise their satiric muscles and discussion forums like U.S. Politics Online and Question It Now continue to surface on the internet. Political debate also manifests in products of popular, consumer culture. In the thesis that follows, I examine one of these sites, the superhero comic book or graphic novel. However, before I can proceed with my investigation, I need to devote some space to the parameters of my inquiry. Since I am in some ways positioning myself in opposition to television, I need to address the issue of media determinism.

**Media Determinism**

In *The Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture*, Barry Brummett renders the following judgment about Marshall McLuhan saying that “McLuhan, too poetic and too
popular to be regarded as quite a serious scholar now, was a happy determinist. One sensed a certain glee in his argument that television was coming to dominate Western culture” (Brummett 7). Brummett is preparing to argue against the idea of media determinism and although his position has merit, this assessment of McLuhan is a tad harsh. It hardly seems fair to dismiss the man’s contributions to scholarship as patently false or naive. In order to understand Brummett’s objections, we must first understand the determinism he so firmly resists.

In the highly influential text, *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan made the declaration that “The ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs…The medium is the ‘message’ because it shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (8-9). As I understand it, McLuhan believed that the structure of the medium is just as influential as the content or the way the medium is employed. In fact, he compares his message to that of Louis Pasteur by asserting that we are so focused on content that the structure of media is as invisible to us as germs were to the early medical community (18). Noam Chomsky is another academic often thought to be a media determinist, and in the example below he provides a fantastic practical example of how this theory operates.

In the documentary *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*, Chomsky answers the question of a curious audience member, a man who wants to know why Chomsky hasn’t appeared more often on television news programs like *Nightline*. The film cuts to an interview with a representative from the show that answers this question. It was suggested that perhaps Chomsky cannot talk on television, that he cannot make his point quickly and before the necessary commercial break. The film cuts back to Chomsky who agrees with this assertion, explaining that television requires concision. Ideas must be expressed neatly and quickly between commercial breaks. According to Chomsky, the requirements of the medium’s structure shapes our thinking, for,

- the beauty of concision (you know, saying a couple of sentences between two commercials), the beauty of that is that you can only repeat conventional thoughts…Suppose you say something that just isn’t regurgitating conventional pieties, suppose you say something that’s the least bit unexpected or controversial…people will reasonably, quite reasonably expect to know what you mean…You can’t give evidence if
you’re stuck with concision. That’s the genius of this structural constraint (Manufacturing Consent Chapter 17).

Concision is a structural constraint of the medium of television. According to Chomsky, our thinking is directed toward orthodoxy by the architecture of the medium. Media determinists would claim that such a function carries over to the rest of our social interactions, that our daily lives are partially determined by the message of the medium.

Brummett doesn’t specifically mention Chomsky, but he addresses the ideas of other scholars who hold similar beliefs. Brummett writes that “a number of these theorists [McLuhan included] will argue that a dominant medium, television in particular, is strongly influencing public discourse. For many of these [media] determinists, widespread reliance on television has damaged the public’s ability to participate in meaningful public discourse” (8). This is, after all, what Chomsky claimed. For him television’s structural requirement of concision forces individuals to revert to orthodoxy and already accepted ideas. Television shuts down critical inquiry because the medium simply cannot support the time demanded to engage in deep exploration of issues. This is the essence of media determinism, that the dominant media (in this case television) shapes the thought processes of the public. ¹

Brummett challenges this claim and his reasons for doing so are reasonable. I share his reluctance to ascribe too much causality to the relationship between media and social attitudes. Such a sweeping statement is suspect and underestimates the public. At the same time, I hesitate to completely dismiss McLuhan and Chomsky’s (and others) observations. Mass media does have the potential to negatively influence perception and behavior. Consequently, my position in this thesis is ambivalent. I attempt to avoid making generalized statements about the function of particular media. At the same time, I recognize that the function described by McLuhan and Chomsky is possible. Television as a medium is not intrinsically insidious and damaging. It can, however, operate in such a way and in the case of much of the news media of the moment, such interaction does seem to be occurring. It was this trend that fed my interaction with comic books and

¹ Theories about media determinism focus on relationships between dominant media and social thought and action. Many would argue that television is no longer the dominant medium of contemporary society, that it is quickly losing ground to the computer. This may be true. Access to the internet is continually increasing and becoming more portable. Even the screens of televised news are beginning to resemble hypertext with scrolling data and juxtaposed graphs. However, my project employs the concept of media determinism in a tangential way. More importantly, I attempt to resist rigid theories of causality. For these reasons, I am not concerned here with hierarchy or primacy of various media.
graphic novels. Before I can elaborate on the connection between comics and politics, however, I need to devote some space to terminology and other technical details.

**Comic Books VS. Graphic Novels**

There is some debate about the term graphic novel. According to Bradford W. Wright,

> Will Eisner coined the term in the late 1970s to differentiate his ambitious and highly personal ‘sequential art’ projects (another euphemism coined by Eisner) from the mainstream superhero comic books and the immature stigma of the medium in general. More sophisticated, lengthier, and pricier than traditional comic books, graphic novels have run the gamut of genres from superheroes and detectives to autobiographies and realistic character studies (291).

Technically speaking, the graphic novel is a single discreet text, while comic books are serialized publications. Many of the texts I examine here were originally published in monthly magazine form. However, there is a growing trend in comic book publishing. More and more titles are being collected and republished in book form. My research has unearthed no definitive reason for this trend, but the fact is that the adventures of comic book protagonists are increasingly unavailable in their original, serial form. Where they were once available for purchase in grocery stores and drugstores, most comic books can now be found only in specialty shops, through online ordering or by direct mail. Conversely, book store shelf space devoted to the graphic novel is increasing. Fans can now walk into Borders or Barnes and Noble and pick up the collected exploits of Spiderman. These changes in the comic book publishing industry seem to also be effecting changes in the creative process. More and more writers are producing story arcs and the result is that rarely are adventures confined to single issues. Many comic books are now being conceptualized in ways remarkably similar to Eisner’s early approach.

Because the majority of the texts I examine are collections of formerly serialized publications, and because the creators conceived of their projects as narratives that span multiple issues, I use the term graphic novel. The exception to this is when examining publications of the past. When discussing the history of the medium, I refer to texts as comic books or comics. My concern is with how popular culture artifacts called comic books function rhetorically, how they provide a site for the management of experience that resists dichotomized debate. However, it is my belief that such a rhetorical function
is a relatively new development. Consequently, a portion of this project is devoted to the examination of changing patterns over time.

**History and Industry Trends**

The comic book industry has a long and exciting history full of conflict and diverse talent. It is not my intention to chronicle every development and trend. Such a project would stray tangentially too far from my main focus, the changing rhetorical function of the superhero figure. In addition, others have already attempted such projects. Bradford W. Wright’s *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* is a text highly recommended by this author who relies quite heavily on this excellent survey of the industry.

In his introduction, Bradford Wright makes the following declaration.

> While I am familiar with a number of theoretical approaches to ‘decoding’ the meaning of popular texts, I find few of these very compelling, and I confess to finding more than a few bewildering and tedious. My basic theoretical assumption regarding audience is the rather simple but well-grounded contention that audiences consume particular forms of entertainment because they hope to find something pleasurable in the experience” (xviii).

Wright is a historian and his basic approach to the medium is a provide as comprehensive a diachronic survey of the form as possible. For his purpose, this method is perfectly reasonable. In fact, as the following text will show, this approach proves invaluable to those wishing to research the field of comic books and their history. I have read extensively in comics, but my exposure to the entire form is significantly deficient compared to Wright’s. I rely on and thank him for bringing together such a comprehensive history, for creating a wonderfully thorough resource. What I have tried to do in the text that follows is take the information provided by Wright and extend it for my own purposes. I use his survey of the medium as a stepping stone, applying a few of the theoretical approaches (Jameson, Burke, Bakhtin etc.) that he purposefully refrained from employing. Hopefully my own approach brings an extra dimension to Wright’s text.

Furthermore, it should be said that all trends presented here are just that, trends. I’ve made every effort to identify and focus on the major themes and rhetorical functions,
such as indoctrination and reinforcement of consensus values, that have manifested over the years. However, such elements are not exclusive.

**Visual Language**

I have no artistic training. For the majority of my adult life I’ve been most comfortable with the written word. However, the primary texts I am examining here are hybrid mediums that integrate visuals with text. The problems with creating an orthodox essay style text in praise of such a medium are obvious. For this reason, I’ve attempted to create this thesis in what Robert E. Horn calls visual language. For Horn, visual language is more than messages conveyed by images or icons. Rather, it is “the use of words and images or words and shapes to form a single communication unit” (Horn 8). The production of such a text is new to me, yet I’ve done my best to incorporate captured images and hypertext links wherever possible.

**Post 911 Climate**

At times, the text that follows may refer to a post-911 climate. This, perhaps deserves some explanation. The media being examined here are all firmly embedded in the social currents of their day. In other words, because the contemporary climate continually invokes the events of 911, because our politicians and media continue to perpetuate this recent, collective memory by creating conceptual links between the current “war on terror” and the actions of the individuals responsible for the sad attacks of 2001, I maintain that all contemporary political discussions involving military policy are highly charged with this memory.

**Chapter One**

In the first chapter, I provide a rough history of the comic book industry. As mentioned above, it is not possible for me to account for every development within the medium. However, I do identify and examine certain dominant trends and show that the industry largely functioned as either an indoctrination tool or a reinforcer of dominant, consensus values. The ideology expressed in comic books changed, swinging from conservative to liberal. Through it all, the bulk of the major titles put forth a clear message about right and wrong.

**Chapter Two**

In the second chapter, I describe the sensibilities of the major comic book publishers as the medium moved into the late twentieth century. I provide a brief account of the tenuous relationship between comics and critical and academic appreciation and
chart some of the attempts of creative talents to complicate the single-minded morality of earlier texts. I finish by looking at a single, significant title, a post 911 revision of the classic superhero team, The Avengers. By using this new text, *The Ultimates* as a case study, I show that many writers and artists are using the medium of comic books to present a multivocal dialogue about the anxiety and ambivalence of the current social climate. As a result, the ideology expressed resembles the condition of Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, with numerous voices and perspectives negotiating shared experience.

**Chapter Three**

The third chapter looks closely and critically at fan discourses operating in electronic communities. Using specific discussion threads from a high traffic website forum, I analyze fan reception of the rhetoric of the new superhero and show how the internet, among other developments in the industry has helped connect the audience to the creators in a democratic way that facilitates the multiple perspectives observed in the previous chapter.
Chapter One

Indoctrination Through Identification: The Early Years

In 1991, Barry Brummett published *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture*. Fifteen years have passed, but most of Brummett’s observations remain sound. According to Brummett, rhetoric is more social practice than official or authorized text. As he notes,

> A public that once read newspapers, listened to radios and to the Chautauqua speaker, or conversed on front porches is increasingly turning to various forms of video for information and entertainment. The verbal texts of speeches and sermons are exploded and their parts scattered among epigrammatic forms of bumper stickers and political lawn signs. The word has not vanished, but it is clear that other forms of communication are encroaching significantly on territory that once belonged exclusively to extended, reasoned discourse. Furthermore, the place and time of rhetoric are moving inexorably from specific locales in which issues are debated, into the more general context of popular culture. In other words, rhetoric as a distinct social practice carried out during concentrated periods of speaking and listening, or reading and writing, is dissipating into a noisy environment teeming with messages (xii).

There are numerous sites where this rhetorical explosion is taking place. Brummett mentions television, bumper stickers, and lawn signs. The list could continue indefinitely. We could include coffee cups and tee shirts, email and magazines. Even supermarkets and department stores bombard us with calculated, persuasive messages. And then there is the comic book or graphic novel, my focus here.

The history of the comic book is rather exciting, filled with propaganda and subversion. It was even the subject of congressional investigation, a target of the anti-communist mania inspired by Senator Joseph McCarthy. In this chapter I will outline the history of this unique medium, paying special attention to titles that prominently featured costumed superheroes. I chart the rhetorical function of these books and reveal how this function matures as the form does.

Identification and the Abstract Image

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2 Brummett positions the phenomenon of a rhetorical social sphere as a relatively new development. Although I do not do so here, it could be argued that persuasion was never as limited as Brummett implies, that it was always already surrounding us. Nevertheless, the idea of a rhetorical popular culture is a sound one.
In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke makes the wonderful declaration that “rhetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall” (23). What he means is that rhetoric takes as its domain the effort of reconciling separated individuals. This is the reason that identification is so important to Burke, and the observation is a sound one. “Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men [and women] were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim unity” (Burke 22). For Burke, it is impossible to imagine rhetoric without identification; It is the central way in which persuasion functions. The comic book industry has known this for some time. However, Burke neglects to provide a clear idea of the placement of identification and division. The most obvious assumption is that identification is situated within a specific text and functions as a means of overcoming ideological division in the world, division that is external to the text. Certainly this is a common configuration. It is not, perhaps, the only configuration. In the text that follows, I apply Burke’s theory of identification to the evolving comic book industry. It is my belief that the medium has played with the placement of identification and division and in chapter two I examine some of these changes. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to understand the rhetorical history of the medium, a history that employed identification in a way like that outlined above. Comic book publishers used the appeal of the superhero to overcome generational division, to indoctrinate the youth into dominant, cultural values.

What makes the superhero figure so compelling, so appealing? Part of the appeal surely comes from the nature of visual representation. In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Scott McCloud writes of the difference between realistic pictorial representation and abstract cartooning. He observes that abstracted images possess a universal quality that more realistic images lack. “The more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe” (31). The idea here is that abstracted images facilitate reader identification. Iconic images act as “vacuum[s] into which our identity and awareness are pulled” (McCloud 36). Of course it’s true that many, if not most, superhero comic books employ art that is relatively realistic. However, the hero is traditionally costumed and identity is obscured. Such concealment returns the realistic body to the iconic realm making identification easier. In addition, costumed heroes are typically idealized or proportionally exaggerated, and what is the idealized if not a form of abstraction? It would seem then, that the comic book superhero genre
presents idealized iconic figures that facilitate the rhetorical management of experience through the process of identification. The question is who is doing the management?

**The Rhetorical Function of a New Medium**

During its early years, the comic book medium exploited the natural affinity between abstracted representation and identification by creating products intended to indoctrinate youth (the predominant audience at the time) into the values of the dominant culture. The phenomenon known as the generation gap is one example of divided individuals. Parents and adults in general are made nervous by children and teenagers, especially when children are engaged in behavior that doesn’t make sense to older generations. Comic books provided a vehicle that could potentially bridge this gap because, as Burke observes, the repetition of identification is crucial to the process of persuasion. In *A Rhetoric of Motives* he writes that “often we must think of rhetoric not in terms of some particular address, but as a general body of identifications that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill” (26). Comic books provided an ideal vehicle for ideological repetition.

Publishers injected into titles, themes and perspectives that aligned with the values of older generations. Bradford W. Wright observes that,

> World War II gave publishers a valuable opportunity to improve their public image. Having secured an enthusiastic audience of young people, leading companies like DC Comics and Fawcett Publications now made an appeal to parents. In the summer of 1941 DC announced the formation of an Editorial Advisory Board to independently advise and approve the content of all DC comic books so that they met ‘wholesome’ moral standards… Publishers also sought to boost their image by linking their products to patriotism and the war effort (33-34).

As indicated above, the primary audience of comics during this time was children. Comic books had an audience that was being fed the perspective of those who were not

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3 Wherever identification is possible there also exists potential for what Jose Esteban Munoz calls disidentification. Individuals often take a representation and queer it before entering a state of identification. Alternatively, one may take so-called negative representations and queer them before beginning identification, essentially transforming that which is represented as bad into something to be celebrated. The costumed superhero figure certainly contains such potential and although I do not do so here, the relationship between the comic book medium and disidentification is worth investigating. For more on this theory see *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics.*
interested in the form as entertainment. Adults rarely read comics, but they knew that their children did and they hoped to take advantage of this fact. At times these efforts were concealed. Fredric Jameson can help shed light on how agendas were often hidden.

In "Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism," Fredric Jameson attempts to create a model of genre theory that reconciles the two previous, dominant models. According to Jameson, most genre theory focused on "two seemingly incompatible tendencies at work...the semantic [essence or meaning] and the syntactic [structural patterns]" (Jameson 168). Efforts to reconcile the two approaches yielded a rough thesis "about the dual nature of genre...defined as that literary discourse which may be examined either in terms of a fixed form or in terms of a mode, but which must be susceptible to study from both these perspectives optionally" (Jameson 169-170). Jameson uses this premise as a building block, a starting point from which to build his theory of dialectical thinking of genre.

"Dialectical thinking can be characterized as historical reflexivity, that is, as the study of an object...which also involves the study of the concepts and categories (themselves historical) that we necessarily bring to the object" (170). In essence, Jameson's dialectical model of genre considers both the text as object and embodiment of historicized or contextualized ideology. The process of such consideration, he believed, would reveal concealed tensions because "every universalizing approach... [attempts] to conceal its own contradictions and repress its own historicity by strategically framing its perspective so as to omit the negative, absence, contradiction, repression" (Jameson170). It is that which is concealed that Jameson believes to be the true ideology of a historicized genre and considering the totalizing semantic and syntactic approaches in tandem reveals such obscurity. Jameson’s approach can be useful when considering the earliest superhero comic books.

After several appearances in Action Comics, Superman debuted in his self titled book in 1939. Wright observes that the character of Superman was a brilliant twentieth-century variation on a classic American hero type. The most pervasive myth in American culture is that of the Western frontier hero, who resolves tensions between wilderness and civilization...Postindustrial American society raised new tensions. Whereas heroes of the previous centuries, like Daniel Boone, Natty
Bumpo, and Wyatt Earp, could conquer and tame the savage American frontier, twentieth-century America demanded a superhero who could resolve the tensions of individuals in an increasingly urban, consumer-driven, and anonymous mass society (Wright 10).

This was also the period of America's Great Depression. Understandably then, the superhero figure became a champion of the common man. In fact, most of Superman's adventures during the first few years of publication focused on political corruption and destructive, corporate greed. Superman fought against sinister lobbyists and selfish industrialists. These were the villains of America. Costumed foes came later. It wasn't long before the success of Superman inspired imitations. Soon Batman was born (1940). When this title also proved profitable, publishers everywhere attempted to cash in on the formula. The genre exploded and characters like the Flash, Hawkman, Dr. Fate, Green Lantern and Wonder Woman flooded newsstands (Wright 11). Most of these titles imitated the narrative structures of their models. The common man, it seemed, had champions everywhere.

Jameson's dialectical view of genre, however, reveals an obscured ideology that is at odds with the surface presentation. For example, according to the narratives, these heroes were standing up for the little guy, protecting urban residents from the intimidation tactics of local mobsters and crooked public officials. Other details seemed to imply a different perspective. Superman's private identity was Clark Kent, a newspaper employee (a rather enviable and secure job during the depression). Batman was really Bruce Wayne, a wealthy businessman and heir to a vast fortune. Wonder Woman was an Amazonian warrior who posed as a mild mannered secretary named Diana Prince. Most, if not all, heroes from this era had public identities that were middle or upper class. Even Diana Prince, although a secretary and closer to the blue collar public she defended, was royal by birth. Her secretary status was simply a cover.

On the surface, the heroes were embodiments of Roosevelt's New Deal program, reformers "warning [against] the perils of political corruption" (Wright 24). However, the fact that no hero had social roots in the lower class ranks is revealing. Close

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4 My description of the common person as a “little guy” is used self-consciously. There is much that could be said about gender relations and sex roles in comics. Women, in comic books of early decades, are significantly absent. There is the occasional female superhero, but these are presented primarily as fantasy objects of adolescent males. In Ways of Seeing, John Berger and company make the following observation. “One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear” (47). This is certainly true of early comic books.
examination of the historicized semantic and syntactic levels of the genre reveals the concealed ideology that the common man and woman, despite his and her many virtue's, was "woefully susceptible to deception and coercion" (Wright 24). The common citizen was only worthy of defense, not elevation. Furthermore, control is invested in a few extraordinary individuals who decide what is best for the masses. The true politics were about the preservation of social hierarchy. Superheroes may have appeared to be fighting the system, revealing its flaws and working for change. However, the real agenda was not to change the system, but to remove those who would pervert it. Essentially, there was no problem except for a few bad individuals abusing an otherwise ideal social structure. Liberal politics masked conservative impulses and these impulses were projected to children in the form of fantastic role models, embodiments of wish-fulfillment, figures with whom the youth were eager to identify. The young audience of comic books was manipulated into adopting the ideology of the status quo. However, at times, the ideology appears more overt than covert.

Within a few years, the social climate shifted from a concern with reactions to the Great Depression to fear of war. Although traces of concealed social paradigms remained, one dominant ideology moved to the forefront (in many publications). Of the new patriotic titles, Captain America (1941) was the most popular. “The brash and unforgettable cover of Captain America Comics number 1 depicted the ultra-American hero slugging Adolph Hitler in the face almost a full year before the United States declared war on the Axis” (Wright 30). In many of these books printed before and during the second world war, the surface ideology more closely corresponds to that which is concealed.

During this period, the superhero embodied the idealized American heroic. The message was clear. Virtually every publisher of action and adventure comic books followed the same trend in the months leading up to Pearl Harbor, saturating newsstands with patriotic superheroes costumed in the American flag and bearing names like ‘Uncle Sam,’ ‘Minute-Man,’ ‘The Star-Spangled Kid,’ and even ‘Miss America.’ They championed a loosely defined Americanism synonymous with lofty ideals like democracy, liberty, and freedom from oppression (42). The embodied ideology of the superhero could also be seen in the villains of the day.
World War Two comic books maintained elements of the fantastic and although there were occasional direct confrontations with people like Hitler, many of the adversaries, like the heroes, were costumed abstractions. Patriots fought evil agents of the Axis powers. Captain America soon joined a superhero team called The Invaders and together the heroes battled villains like Dr. Death and The Red Skull, sinister figures who made their connections to Nazi Germany known to all. Such villains were as rhetorically effective as the superheroes themselves. Once again Burke helps elucidate the matter.

In his essay “Definition of Man” included in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*, Kenneth Burke adds to his list of human attributes, perfectionism. Anticipating objection to describing humanity as “rotten with perfection,” Burke explains that “the principle of perfection is central to the nature of language as motive. The mere desire to name something [the use of symbols being another uniquely human characteristic] by its ‘proper’ name, or to speak a language in its distinctive ways is intrinsically ‘perfectionist’” (16). However, the human impulse toward the perfect is not necessarily always positive or benign. Perfection, as Burke uses the term, simply means completion or totality, and can manifest ironically as in the figure of the perfect villain. Burke elaborates on the perfect villain, connecting the idea to his understanding of Aristotle’s observations about the power of antithesis. He writes,

> There is a sheerly *formal* lure, in giving dramatic saliency and at least apparent clarity to any issue. One may find himself hard put to define a policy purely in its own terms, but one can advocate it persuasively by an urgent assurance that it is decidedly *against* such-and-such other policy with which people may be disgruntled. For this reason also, the use of antithesis helps deflect embarrassing criticism (as when rulers silence domestic controversy by turning public attention to animosity against some foreign country’s policies). And in this way, of course, antithesis helps reinforce unification by scapegoat (19).

The figure of the super villain allowed for the enemy to become the perfect embodiment of evil, to be personified in ways that allowed for little ambiguity.

Such narratives were pervasive and even extended to American citizens who might resist the jingoism of the day. Wright observes that,

> Comic books urged all Americans, including children, to participate in the
war effort. Those who remained aloof or pursued selfish interests appeared as misguided fools at best, traitors at worst. The comic book war effort, much like the real one, left no room for ambiguity or debate on most issues... Pre-Pearl Harbor stories saw Superman exposing prominent isolationists and pacifists as spies working for a hostile foreign power. Other comic books portrayed isolationists as paranoid old hermits (44).

I should say that my examination of rhetorical function is not intended to pass judgment. Although it’s true that the comic book heroes of the day presented an extreme form of patriotism, the appeal of fighting Nazi’s, Italian fascists and Japanese (especially after the Pearl Harbor attack) is easy to understand. Furthermore, history reveals the importance of World War II. It’s hard to build a case for pacifism and non intervention when millions are being slaughtered. The important thing to remember here is that comic books, as successful popular culture products, provided an effective vehicle for propaganda, for persuasion.

When the war ended, it seemed as though the superhero had served his/her function and was no longer relevant. Many of the hero titles introduced during the war went out of production (Wright 57). During the next two decades, the comic book industry went through many changes. Publishers introduced crime, romance, horror, jungle adventure, educational and anti-communist morality tale books in attempts to revitalize the industry. The often violent nature of some of these varieties drew congressional scrutiny and public outrage. However, this isn’t the place to chronicle all the developments of the industry. Suffice it to say that the superhero did still have a place in the medium. In fact, these figures soon rose again to prominence.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, superheroes had once again become the most compelling figures of the medium. They did so by self-consciously staying relevant. Once again they reflected the dominant ideology which was now more liberal and progressive. An 1966 issue of The Avengers demonstrates how the ideology of comic books swung from the right to the left.

By 1966 the American Civil Rights Movement had seen some major victories, but racial bigotry remained a source of divisive national tension. In issue 32 of their popular series The Avengers, Marvel debuted a sinister new organization called The Sons of the Serpent. Members of this group were elaborately costumed in reptilian disguises and although their clothing looked nothing like the white sheets and hoods of the Ku Klux
Klan, an ideological connection was clear. Like the KKK, The Sons of the Serpent were obsessed with notions of racial purity and the power that comes with entitlement. Altercations with the Avengers were always the result of the groups terrorizing minorities and, as the image below demonstrates, the group never hesitated to voice their bigoted beliefs.

It’s important to note that although the ideology expressed in comic books varied over time, swinging from conservative to liberal, it remained largely unitary. Readings of texts can employ Jameson’s dialectical model and suppressed ideology may be located. Conversely, comics may be understood by scrutinizing the often didactically expressed surface ideology. In the end, however, a single, coherent worldview emerges. In the next chapter I look at contemporary comic books and graphic novels to explore ways in which unitary ideology is being challenged. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to briefly touch on some of the developments in the medium. Change is typically a progressive and gradual process and comic books’ movement beyond the ideological tug-of-war described above is no exception. In the case of this medium, it helps to look at the struggle for critical recognition since issues of credibility are intimately tied to ideological evolution.

The Struggle for Recognition

In this chapter I’ve described the rhetorical function of the comic book in the past. Despite public awareness of the medium’s potential, the comic book was generally regarded as low culture, a product rarely worthy of critical interest. In recent years, comic books have enjoyed some critical and academic respect. Creators such as Art Spiegelman and Warren Ellis have created graphic stories that take on substantial social issues in intelligent ways. However, despite qualified kudos, superhero titles, have been regarded as inferior products of the medium, as escapist fantasy rather than social commentary.

The introduction to the first collection of Transmetropolitan stories provides a glimpse of the dominant attitude toward superhero comics. Garth Ennis (writer of the Preacher series) writes “I’ve been lucky… because I’ve been able to channel [my] venomous attitude into a number of projects and stories. Not so Mr. Ellis, forced to filter his own poison through the dubious medium of the superhero story. The work’s been great, but at the end of the day it’s still about grown men in tights” (2). This quote reveals the dominant attitude about the superhero figure. When the form isn’t dismissed
as simply irrelevant and silly, it is maligned as offensive. This is the position that Alan Moore takes.

Alan Moore was one of the industry’s most talented and respected creators. Much of his work was conceived as limited series, a form that transitions naturally into collections, graphic novels. In 1981 Moore produced a limited series called *V for Vendetta*. In it the world has been devastated by a nuclear war and a fascist government has taken control of England. A panoptic system of cameras and listening devices makes all social action open to government scrutiny and the masses are lulled by insipid entertainment propaganda. As with any dystopian vision, the majority of public officials are corrupt and perverse. V, a mysterious figure in a mask bearing the likeness of Guy Fawkes, conducts destructive, antiestablishment acts designed to eventually overthrow the Fascist government. [Click here to learn more about Guy Fawkes.](#)

In 1989 Moore created *From Hell*, another limited series turned graphic novel that investigates the murders of Jack the Ripper. Both of the titles mentioned above were developed into major motion pictures, but it is *The Watchmen* for which Moore is most well known. *The Watchmen*, published in serial form in 1986 and 1987, was one of the few comic books featuring superheroes to gain critical acclaim.

As his distinguished body of work demonstrates, Alan Moore is one of the most acclaimed creative talents to have worked in the comic book medium, yet even he denigrated the superhero figure. Wright provides an excellent description of Moore’s limited series/graphic novel. “*The Watchmen* was Moore’s obituary for the concept of heroes in general and superheroes in particular. ‘I don’t believe in heroes,’ he later confirmed. ‘A hero is somebody who has been set upon a pedestal above humanity,’ and ‘the belief in heroes…leads to people like Colonel Oliver North,’ who assume that the best interests of society are consistent with their own political views. Moore’s superheroes reflected his disdain. However well-intentioned, they were prone to paranoid moral delusions and dangerous fascist tendencies” (272). Art Spiegelman, Warren Ellis and Alan Moore have done spectacular work deserving of the praise they receive (*Maus* won Spiegelman a Pulitzer Prize) and there are many other talents producing equally notable work. In recent years, creators of graphic work like Daniel Clowes (*Ghost World*) and Harvey Pekar (*American Splendor*) have enjoyed crossover success, seeing their books developed into quality films made by talented directors. The work of people like Chris Ware (*Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*) and
Marjane Satrapi (*Persepolis*) can be seen on display in art museums and under the arms of graduate students. It wouldn’t cause anyone to raise an eyebrow to see copies of Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* series floating through the halls of the campus classics department. Despite this, the sentiments expressed above by Ennis and Moore dominate the perception of the superhero.

As the above examples indicate some graphic novels have gained respect, but the praise has been qualified. Critics seem willing to praise works that resembles the stereotypical “literary” text. Alan Moore’s *V for Vendetta* seems acceptable because critics can use the genre of dystopian fiction as a frame of reference. It resembles comfortably canonical texts like Orwell’s *1984*. Warren Ellis’ *Transmetropolitan* has at its center a rogue journalist named Spider Jerusalem. Although the setting for Jerusalem’s antics is somewhat futuristic, we again have a comfortable frame of reference as Ellis’ protagonist is continually compared to the late Hunter S. Thompson, the cigarette smoking, drug taking, eloquent and irreverent madman observer of the folly of human society. This observation is not a criticism. Each example listed above is a fantastic achievement that I wouldn’t hesitate to recommend to someone curious about the medium. However, superhero titles are rarely, if ever, given the same respect and that is a shame. In Chapter 2, I hope to remedy this.

[Click here to read more about the growing reputation of the graphic novel](#)
Chapter 2
Superheroes Reborn:
Updating and Complicating Heroic Icons

Post 911 Political Climate

I mentioned in the introduction that I assume popular culture texts to be embedded in the immediate cultural climate and that for this reason I also assume that contemporary comic books and graphic novels are operating in a post-911 world. It may be beneficial, however, to write a bit about my interpretation of this social climate.

At the time of this writing, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are a mere 5 years past. This recent history is still being processed and I have no doubt that a variety of theoretical perspectives will soon be fighting for interpretive supremacy. What follows are observations drawn from personal experience, perhaps the most appropriate method for this paper about popular culture management of experience.

In January of 2002, the President delivered a State of the Union Address. Speaking about military action in Afghanistan, he declared,

Our progress is a tribute to the spirit of the Afghan people, to the resolve of our coalition, and to the might of the United States military. (Applause.) When I called our troops into action, I did so with complete confidence in their courage and skill. And tonight, thanks to them, we are winning the war on terror. The men and women of our Armed Forces have delivered a message now clear to every enemy of the United States: Even 7,000 miles away, across oceans and continents, on mountaintops and in caves -- you will not escape the justice of this nation (www.whitehouse.gov) Read the entire transcript here.

This is just a small excerpt from the President’s post-911 State of the Union Address, but it serves well to demonstrate the American political climate of the last several years. For example, notice the possessive diction. He refers to “our” coalition, “our” troops and “this” nation. We might note that one rhetorical strategy here is to attempt to include the American people in these sentiments. The president speaks collectively attempting to make the audience a part of the triumphant spirit of these words. In addition, this collective is positioned against the antithesis, the “enemies” of the United States. This speech falls quite nicely into Burke’s analysis of the function of the perfect enemy. There is a conscious attempt to unite a variety of individuals against a common scapegoat. However, this supposed unity reveals itself to be intangible and imaginary.
The President says later in the same speech that,

Our military has put the terror training camps of Afghanistan out of business, yet camps still exist in at least a dozen countries. A terrorist underworld — including groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, Jaish-i-Mohammed — operates in remote jungles and deserts, and hides in the centers of large cities (www.whitehouse.gov).

Notice that the “enemy” is not as perfect as it would first seem. In fact, the enemy is, as we have been reminded time and time again, terror. Unfortunately, terror is an abstract concept. It has no corporeal identity, no ethnicity, and no homeland. Furthermore, as the quote above indicates, this enemy is functioning invisibly in a variety of unspecified locations. Although certain groups are named, no countries are identified. The result is that the enemy could be anywhere, including in the United States. Such possibility counteracts earlier declarations of unity and cohesiveness by implying that the enemy may, in fact, be internal.

The result of this de-centered, nebulous enemy is that the rhetoric of unity is easily employed as a divisive tool. Quite often, as many liberals can attest to, conservatives have taken their opponents and cast them as sympathetic toward “the enemy.” Returning to Lakoff’s theory of moral politics and the Conservative paradigm of government as the strict parent, it’s easy to see how challenge to the administration or current policy can be turned around. As Lakoff writes, “to the conservative, immoral behavior is attributable to individual character, not to social causes: What is right and wrong are clear, and the question is whether you are morally strong enough to do what’s right” (280). By casting contemporary conflict in terms of us vs. them, good vs. evil, justice vs. terror, the president and his administration seem to be employing the model of antithesis in order to unify the nation against a common enemy. However, these strong labels also create a rigid structure that allows for little dissent and challenge. If you disagree or question, you must be on “their” side, not ours. In the end, rather than unite, such rhetoric increases the divide between the two parties by fostering a climate of opposition and defensiveness. This is my understanding of the post-911 climate in America.

The world of *The Ultimates* is intentionally constructed to reflect our post-911 environment. The first issue opens with a flashback moment, Captain America battling
the Nazi’s during World War II. However, contemporary images of threat are projected backward onto the past as we see Captain America attacking the enemy by flying a plane into their base. Although the plane is used to attack the Nazi’s, such an image is now loaded with memories of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Regardless of temporal positioning, such an image resonates with readers.

The image mentioned above is followed by several other that also echo the chaos of 911. The second issue opens with a page devoted to ground zero. Of course in the parallel world of *The Ultimates* there is no direct mention of the attack on the World Trade Center. However, like the image of the crashing plane, the sight of substantial damage in New York, devastation that resulted in civilian casualties, once again evokes memories of the 911 attacks. Time and time again, *The Ultimates* reminds readers that the environment of the comic book is intended to be a reflection of our own world. The book even incorporates versions of actual leaders such as President George W. Bush, whose administration entered office just before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The continuous use of such details serves to ground the world of *The Ultimates* in our own reality. It is self-consciously rooted in a post 911 climate and its creators take advantage of this environment to reinvent iconic figures in ways that challenge and complicate the dichotomies of this environment.

**Iconic Heroes Reborn**

As the previous chapter demonstrated, the reasoning behind the dismissal of the superhero is easy to understand. The ideologies embodied by these figures has typically been over simplified, reductive. However, this doesn’t render the superhero an anachronism. It simply means that it’s time to redefine the hero’s character. There are several major talents working to do just that. In the text that follows I concentrate on the products of one of these individuals, Mark Millar. His limited series, *The Ultimates* provides an ideal example of how the superhero’s character can be refashioned to remain relevant in our ambivalent social climate.

In 2005, Millar created a series for Image Comics called *Wanted*. In this book, all superheroes were killed in 1986 in a giant battle with a newly organized coalition of villains. Realizing that they separately could never defeat the heroes, the villains had created an uneasy truce. With the heroes out of the equation, they proceeded to divide control of the planet, creating a global version of organized crime, a network so powerful
that their authority is uncontested by all other official organizations.

In a short letter included in the graphic novel collection of the series, Millar writes of his youth. Recalling an innocent conversation with his much older brother, he writes, I can remember the scene with absolute clarity. I was sitting in my shared bedroom (there were eight of us in the house) re-reading the [Superman] book again and again by the glow from the electric fire and I asked my brother Bobby what had happened to Superman. Why were there plane crashes on the news? Why were there earthquakes? Why didn't Superman help people in real life like he did in the comics if he was this great American hero? Bobby grinned the same grin he pulled when he told me my Dad was Hitler during the war, that he could read my mind, and that I'd inherit superhuman powers on my seventh birthday. "What happened to Superman? Didn't you hear?" he asked. "Superman disappeared during a big war with all the super-villains. Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, Captain America; they all disappeared... (140).

This reveals a frustration with the traditional comic book heroic figure, the feeling that these mythic characters are disingenuous and unrelated to the ugly complexities of the real world. Wanted is an amusingly vulgar and pessimistic series. Although it parallels the dominant paradigm of the superhero as extraneous to the real world, Millar was not content to end his interrogation of these iconic figures here. In 2002 he took on the job of reinventing the classic superhero team the Avengers. The result is the wonderfully complex limited series The Ultimates. Before we can examine the changes made by Millar, it is helpful to understand the history of the Avengers.

In 1963, Marvel Comics published the first issue of The Avengers, a title that assembled a team of some of the publisher’s already high profile heroes. The first lineup was comprised of Thor (the Norse God of Thunder, son of Odin), Iron Man (a Vietnam vet and wealthy industrialist who developed a super suit), Ant-Man/Giant Man (Hank Pym, a biochemist who developed special size altering serums), Wasp (Janet Van Dyne, a wealthy socialite and associate of Hank Pym converted into another size altering superhero) and the Hulk (a scientist whose exposure to a detonated gamma bomb caused him to periodically change form) (DeFalco 16-17). Soon added to the roster (issue #4) was Captain America, whose body, accidentally frozen and preserved during the end of World War II, was discovered and revived by the newly formed Avengers. Over the
years The Avengers continued to change. Characters joined, left and returned until virtually every hero in the Marvel universe could claim membership or past membership.

The revolving lineups and occasional continuity problems may be frustrating at times, but it is also part of the charm of the Marvel universe and part of the appeal of the Avengers series. As Tom DeFalco writes in the Afterword to *Avengers: The Ultimate Guide*, “if the Avengers can be summed up in a single word, it’s ‘change…’ If the Avengers teach us anything, it’s that change is inevitable. We have to expect and deal with it” (136). With this in mind, let’s look at a few of the changes that Millar’s new incarnation implements.

As mentioned in the previous sections, much of the contemporary media discussion of politics is rigidly binary. As the examples in chapter one showed, comic books have historically functioned in a similar fashion. Ideological alignment fluctuated from right to left, but the values presented to audiences were essentially monolithic. Because publishers identify and create formulas based on successful trends, sometimes this uniformity was industry wide. The result is that the comic book industry, especially the superhero titles, underwent a tug of war similar to the television partisan competition observed by Jon Stewart on *Crossfire*. Since 911, this has been changing.

A recent online interview with Mark Millar is revealing. Speaking about his current project, Millar commented,

> It's really lazy writing to make everything black and white... I'm a politics buff and really hate seeing America divided into red and blue states because I know people in red states who have blue opinions. And we're all very complex. No one person can really even be described as liberal or a conservative... People are more complex than you think and I wanted to do the same thing with superheroes (comicbookresources.com).

[Click here to read the complete interview with Mark Millar](http://comicbookresources.com)

Once again I am reminded of Jon Stewart. Millar isn’t speaking about the media. He isn’t reflecting on television here. Nevertheless, he expresses ideas similar to those voiced by the frustrated *Crossfire* guest. Politics in the real world, the world outside the television studio are messy and complicated and rarely easily reduced to right vs. left, red vs. blue. In the quote above, Millar is speaking about a different project, a new superhero title called *Civil War*. However, this project is a sort of continuation of the events in *The
Ultimates. In each case, politics produce internal conflict within characters as they try to make sense of their personal loyalties and convictions. Few individuals see the issues in clear terms. Perhaps the best place to begin an examination of these conflicts is with the cover of the comics.

Even a casual, comparative glance at the covers of the first issues of The Avengers and The Ultimates is telling. The original series employs clean, bright coloring to communicate the indisputable majesty of the heroes. In addition, the cover describes the heroes to readers, letting the audience know (in case there was any doubt), that these are figures to be admired. In comparison to The Avengers’ might and power, Loki (Thor’s brother and the Avengers first opponent) is described as “evil.” The result is that conflict is cast in simple good vs. evil terms.

The cover of the first issue The Ultimates is quite different. In this picture we see Captain America in the foreground, shield raised high. The shadowy figures of Giant Man (a different incarnation of Hank Pym’s Ant-Man), Thor, Iron Man, and Wasp surround him. Although this is a color cover, the shades are subdued. Even Captain America himself is partially obscured by shadow. Streaks of light beam outward from an indeterminate source in the background, partially encircling the team. The light is mostly situated near the ground and streaking up, but there is also a brilliant glow higher, making it difficult to tell if this is a rising or setting sun. Either way, large portions of the heroes remain unilluminated. The visual tension between light and darkness both proclaims and questions the heroic status of these figures. Furthermore, there is the issue of the placement of figures.

A close look at the arrangement of the teammates stimulates a sensation of uncertainty. As with the stress between light and shadow, the bodies on display represent an uneasy mixture of patriotic might and resignation. First we have Captain America, the most prominent character on display. As mentioned, he stands partially in shadows. However, for the most part, he is clearly visible. We can make out details like the star on his chest, the military style combat boots on his feet, the bulging pockets of his belt and, of course, the determined look on his face.

5 This is a perfect example of how comics can get confusing. The events of the Civil War series are set in another revision of the Marvel universe. In this world, the Avengers have disbanded only to be reassembled (and published) as The New Avengers. Consequently, the events are not in continuity with those in the Ultimate universe. However, the story is thematically similar, with large numbers of heroes in conflict with each other over political policy.

6 The cover of the graphic novel edition of the series is the same as that of the first issue of the comic.
In comparison, his teammates are comprised entirely of silhouettes. The only visible details are the circular ornaments of Iron Man and Thor’s costumes. Furthermore, these other heroes are given lesser status through their placement. On the whole, they are about half the size of Captain America and they are clearly presented as being behind, not with, him. Comparing this cover to that of the first issue of *The Avengers*, we see that there each hero is given equal space. Iron Man, the Hulk and Thor are roughly the same size (though the Hulk is somewhat hunched). Ant-Man and Wasp, are smaller because of the function of their powers, but they are placed in the foreground so as not to be missed.

Not only is Captain America the dominant figure of *The Ultimates* cover, he is breaking out of the cover’s frame. His shield actually stretches up to interact with the book’s title. In his influential text, *Comics And Sequential Art: Principles & Practice of the World’s Most popular Art Form*, Will Eisner stresses the importance of the frame. Eisner writes,

> The frame’s shape (or absence of one) can become a part of the story itself. It can be used to convey something of the dimension of sound and emotional climate in which the action occurs, as well as contributing to the atmosphere of the page as a whole. The intent of the frame here is not so much to provide a stage as to heighten the reader’s involvement with the narrative…The illusion of power and threat is displayed by allowing the actor to burst out of the confines of the panel. Since the panel border is assumed to be inviolate in a comic page this adds to the sense of unleashed action (46).

It’s true that power does not necessarily equal threat, but given the numerous mixed signals encoded in the cover of *The Ultimates*, Captain America’s refusal to be contained within the frame adds a more martial (and less protective) quality to this image.

We might also notice the cover’s text, or lack of it. Here it is useful to consider the history of the relationship between the visual image and the printed word. In *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*, W.J.T. Mitchell explains that most people approach images as objects to be decoded through language. According to Mitchell,

> Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language. They want neither to be leveled into a ‘history of images’ nor elevated into
a ‘history of art,’ but to be seen as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities…What pictures want, then, is not to be interpreted, decoded, worshipped, smashed, exposed, or demystified by their beholders, or to enthrall their beholders…What pictures want in the last instance, then, is simply to be asked what they want… (47-48).

Although Mitchell’s attribution of desire to images is a bit conceptually thorny, his conclusion is sensible. As I understand this quote, Mitchell detects a pattern of reading images that is somewhat reductive. This tendency to translate into words often closes interpretive possibility, locking the image in a state of authorized symbolic function. Such is the case with the cover of *The Avengers #1*.

On the cover of *The Avenger’s* book, we are explicitly told that these are “earth’s mightiest super-heroes.” Marvel often used such declarations to hype their products and although this statement is partially a marketing strategy, it is in perfect harmony with the images on the cover. The publisher may be trying to entice the audience into making a purchase, but they are also telling them how to read the text. Audiences are given a translation of the cover, minimizing the need for reader participation in the construction of meaning and reducing the number of possible ways of seeing the visual message.

In contrast, the cover of *The Ultimates* avoids captions and text balloons. All we are told is that these characters are “super-human,” but the meaning of such a label is unclear. On one hand, we could assume that super-human is equal to super-hero. This is, after all, the way we are accustomed to processing these iconic figures. On the other hand, we can perform a literal reading of this description, one that is more disturbing. It’s important to remember that Mitchell is not claiming a superior position for the image. He simply maintains that visual communication should not be relegated to a subordinate status. This thinking is consistent with Robert Horn’s definition of visual language, the cooperation of image and printed word and the limited text on the cover of *The Ultimates* demonstrates how printed text and image can rhetorically function in tandem to provoke close reading and insightful interpretation.

The cover of Millar’s revision of the Avengers labels the icons as super-human rather than super-heroic and this subtle alteration is significant. As detailed in the previous chapter, the superhero was historically the embodiment of the ideal. This was what made him/her a hero, the placement above human error. Ideologically and physically, superheroes were models of virtue. This was even true in later decades when
the brooding and conflicted superhero appeared on the scene. “Outsiders though they might be, there was never a question as to the morality of the Marvel superheroes. They never hurt innocent people, never killed anyone, and generally respected the law” (Wright 218). Changing this label to super-human also changes this definition. Human beings are fallible, often confused and sometimes just wrong and nasty. If humans are capable of error are super-humans capable of super error? This is the sort of question that this new label, when combined with the image as analyzed above, provokes and the book’s narrative encourages us to examine it carefully. The best place to begin such scrutiny is with the origin of the team, the reason for the formation of The Ultimates. The origin of the Avengers began because of the Hulk. This is also true of the Ultimates, but Millar has complicated things.

The Avengers were formed by accident. Thor’s brother Loki (the Norse god of mischief) created an elaborate plan to get revenge against the thunder god. Believing the Hulk powerful enough to destroy Thor, Loki devised a plan to put the two heroes in conflict. He tricked the Hulk into destroying a train trestle and Thor did come to the rescue. Unfortunately for Loki, so did Ant-Man, the Wasp, and Iron Man (DeFalco16). The heroes soon saw through the ruse and joined together to defeat Loki and realizing the power of their combined might, Thor, Hulk, Iron Man, Ant-Man and the Wasp decided to join forces. The Avengers were born.

It's ironic that Loki's trap resulted in the birth of such a powerful team of heroes. Instead of destroy one, he united five. However, what is even more significant is the clear locus of blame. The sides of the quarrel are clearly drawn. The Hulk was cast as a villain briefly, but this deception proved easily transparent. Good and bad are easily determined with minimal confusion. The formation of the Ultimates reveals concerns about such neat moral delineation.

The series opens in the aftermath of a devastating attack on New York. Bruce Banner had been a federally employed scientist in charge of rediscovering the super soldier serum that had created Captain America during World War Two. When the government refused to grant permission for human trials, Banner secretly administered the drug to himself and the result was his transformation into the Hulk. This Hulk, however, was not at all like the articulate and thoughtful member of the original

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7 A previous conflict among the brothers had resulted in Odin exiling Loki to the Isle of Silence. Although banished, Loki maintained much of his divine powers and used projected “mental images” to engage his brother and the other heroes in his convoluted trap.
Avengers. He was monstrous and went on a rampage that resulted in the destruction of Chelsea Piers. Although the Hulk attack may not be the only reason that the Ultimates are created, it is a huge factor.

Nick Fury is the director of the security organization called S.H.I.E.L.D (The Supreme Headquarters International Espionage Law-enforcement Division) and in charge of assembling a new team of superheroes (DeFalco 81). Early in the book, he has a luncheon with the recovering Dr. Banner and explains why the government is still prepared to fund the Super Soldier Program (soon to become the Ultimates) that Banner had been working on. Fury, who describes his position as "the Pope, the Queen and the President of the United States all rolled into one" explains that despite Banner's crimes, "crime is becoming super-crime [and] terrorism is becoming super-terrorism" (Millar 32-33). Fury's comments here directly recall the post 911 rhetoric surrounding the creation of the Homeland Security Department and this distinction is important to note.

As mentioned above, *The Ultimates* remains relatively faithful to the origin story of the original Avengers team in that a disaster involving The Hulk is a direct, contributing factor. However, in the original scenario the hero was framed and the guilt of the true villain (Loki) was easily discovered. In the world of The Ultimates, Dr. Banner alone is responsible for the devastation. He deliberately and selfishly circumvented policy and conducted reckless and unauthorized tests on a human subject with disastrous results. Dr. Banner’s personal insecurities are continually referenced and it is made clear that his actions were motivated not by a sense of patriotic duty or scientific curiosity, but by the hope of personal glory and reputation. He craves validation. Another comparison of origin stories reveals the significance of this alteration.

The Hulk has long been one of Marvel's most beloved and enduring characters. In fact, with the exception of Spiderman, he is the best known hero created by this comic publisher. In addition to appearances in a variety of Marvel publications like *The Avengers*, The Hulk maintained a loyal following with his own title, became a popular television program in the seventies, and was introduced to new audiences in a 2003 film by acclaimed director Ang Lee. A major contributing factor to this enduring popularity is

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8 My source text is the graphic novel compilation of *The Ultimates* which collects the first thirteen issues of the monthly comic. Unfortunately, the edition lacks pagination. In order to reference specific sections, I have been forced to assign page numbers myself. I take the first title page after the collection’s introduction as page number one.
the circumstance of his creation, his status as monstrous, but innocent and essentially good, even noble.

Although the story has been revised from time to time, The Hulk is usually born through Banner's accidental exposure to gamma radiation. Furthermore, Dr. Banner typically encounters this danger while committing a noble sacrifice to save another. Such action makes the figure of the Hulk sympathetic. Banner became an innocent monster, an accidental Jekyll and Hyde and over the years, audiences have come to invest a great deal of sympathy and occasionally empathy in this conflicted character. Simply put, we want Dr. Banner to win.

Millar brilliantly exploits our connection to the Hulk figure by removing some of the innocence. In this world, Dr. Banner acted out of self interest and impatience. He did not anticipate the outcome of his unauthorized trial, but his motives were hardly noble. In the Ultimate universe, Banner is a mousy, insecure man who hoped to reproduce in himself a new Captain America. He was, after all, working on a super soldier serum, trying to rediscover the formula that created the glorious World War Two hero. Such a connection not only challenges our view of the Hulk figure. By turning Banner into a foil for Captain America, Millar also forces us to reevaluate our perspective of this traditional all American hero. There is implicit foreshadowing here. If Banner is now truly monstrous, what about the other heroes we are to meet?

In chapter one, it was established that abstracted art such as imagery employed in comic books invites reader identification. This is the reason that comic books were typically employed as indoctrination tools and reinforcers of dominant consensus values. However, contemporary titles are taking things one step further. Once again we must turn to Burke to understand the new rhetorical function of titles like Millar’s *The Ultimates*.

Burke observes that

In pure identification there would be no strife. Likewise, there would be no strife in absolute separateness, since opponents can join battle only through a mediatory ground that makes their communication possible, thus providing the first condition necessary for their interchange of blows. But put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric (25).
Like the creators of comic books in earlier decades, Millar adeptly manipulates reader identification, but he does so in a newly sophisticated way. In early comics, readers were encouraged to identify with the abstracted ideology embodied by the fantasy figure of the superhero. The central goal was to position the reader, through identification, against the values and belief systems that threatened the establishment. Opposition was clearly situated within the figure of the perfect villain, assuring that belief systems remained in neatly demarcated categories.

Millar’s approach to identification and division can be divided into two discreet operations. First, identification and division are placed within individual characters, causing them to become more human than ever in the history of comic books. Second, Millar exploits the long histories of the characters involved with his superhero team. Because each figure is a powerhouse of the Marvel stable, readers are accustomed to enjoying and identifying with several characters simultaneously. For example, fans of Captain America are also often fans of Thor or Iron Man. One of the endearing qualities of the Avengers is that the team “tended to bicker” (Wright 215). For the most part, internal disputes were minor. Millar takes this idiosyncratic characteristic of the team and heightens it, introducing conflicts of political rather than group policy. The result is that readers feel their sympathies pulled in opposing directions. We are forced, through this fractured identification, to invest portions of ourselves in a variety of perspectives.

Let’s look first at the internalized identification and division. Most audience members already have a personal history with these characters. We want to like them and we do our best to retain as much affinity as possible. Millar does not make this retention easy. At every turn, he introduces dimensions of character that make us wince or pause, consistently deconstructing the superhero by revealing him/her to be human, no more perfect than any average human being. Perhaps the best example of this (besides the character of Dr. Banner/the Hulk already mentioned) is found in the triangular relationship between Hank Pym (Giant Man/Ant-Man), Janet Van Dyne (the Wasp), and Steve Rogers (Captain America).

Hank Pym (Giant-Man/Ant-Man) is married to Janet Van Dyne (the Wasp). Unfortunately, Pym is an insecure, jealous man prone to depression and violent outbursts of temper. Early in the series story, Janet visits Hank in his lab and notices a bottle of Prozac. Holding the bottle up, Janet makes the following, revealing comment to her husband. “You know, you’re definitely on a roll again, Hank. I don’t think I’ve seen you
this super-charged about work since you built that little pacemaker for the cat” (36). The moment is presented with humor. The idea of a feline pacemaker is amusing. However, we also get the sense that Janet is attempting to minimize past troubles. She hints at Hank’s dark past.

Later, we see what sort of problems have plagued the marriage. The team had recently been assembled and Bruce Banner had indulged in another foolish drug trial on himself that resulted in the Hulk once again being unleashed and creating devastation and death in New York. The Ultimates had defeated the Hulk and enjoyed a measure of public praise and celebrity as a result. Tony Stark (Iron Man) invited the team members to a formal dinner at his Park Avenue estate. We see Janet and Hank at home. She’s preparing to go out, while Hank is hunched over his computer working obsessively with a brooding expression on his face. An argument develops when a bitter and jealous Hank begins making accusations, berating his wife for behaving in what he feels is a flirtatious way.

The argument soon escalates and turns uglier and we see a very insecure husband consumed by both sexual and professional jealousy. When Janet gets angry in return, Hank becomes violent and strikes her. He immediately realizes that he was wrong and tries to apologize, but Janet, perhaps fed up because of a history of domestic violence, immediately retaliates with an elbow to his chin. She then grabs a piece of electronics from his desk and bashes him again in the face and quickly follows this with a savage bite to his forearm. The fight then turns cruel and Janet shrinks down to her Wasp size to get away. Hank douses his now miniscule wife with bug spray and as she huddles beneath the desk he uses his Ant-Man helmet to send a swarm of ants to attack her.

When the team discovers the incident and visits the seriously injured Janet in the hospital, Fury makes the following observation. “Man, this is a nightmare. We designed Giant Man to be an action figure, for God’s sake. He ain’t supposed to do stuff like this” (161). This comment speaks straight to the heart of the book. Fury is absolutely correct. In the traditional comic book world, superheroes do not behave in such a way. They do not physically assault their wives.

It’s important to note the sexual politics of this moment. It is, after all, the character called “Giant-Man” who nearly kills his wife. Although this moment in the text reveals much about the construction of masculinity or the hyper-masculinity often encouraged by the superhero figure, I’d like to focus instead on the direct political
connection. Fury says they “designed” Giant-Man. What does he mean? After all, Hank Pym created the growth serum that gave him his powers.

Pym, like Banner, was employed by the government, working on the super soldier program. His results were always intended for military use. Moreover, Fury works closely with a public relations expert, a spin doctor hired to create the most positive media image possible. In fact, during a high profile “launch party” Fury comments that “right now this feels more like a Hollywood event than the launch of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s new defense initiative” (70). Giant-Man, like the Ultimates, is a deliberately constructed image. The man inside the suit, on the other hand, is not so endearing. By revealing the superhero to be an ideological construct, Millar forces audiences to interrogate their personal admiration for such figures. As in the Burke quote above, the readers’ history of identification with the icon is placed ambiguously next to the division created by the moment of domestic violence. Millar uses this to usher an invitation for readers to interrogate their personal concepts of right and wrong. This is where Captain America enters the equation. Giant-Man and the Wasp are somewhat minor characters in the Marvel universe. Devoted readers and fans will possess a knowledge of them, but to the casual reader, they may be unknowns who bring little baggage with them. The same cannot be said of Captain America.

As mentioned above Captain America is involved in the Personal drama of the Pym’s marriage. After seeing Janet in the hospital, the teammates learn from Betty Ross that the Pym’s do, in fact, have a history of domestic violence. Captain America (Steve Rogers) sits silently listening to the history of the troubled marriage. Later, without telling anyone of his plan, Rogers tracks down the vanished Pym and confronts him in a bar. Pym tries to talk to Rogers, tries to explain his guilt, shame and history with antidepressants, but Rogers won’t hear any of it. He insists that Pym step outside to fight.

There are several ways to read this altercation. The instinctive response for many is to cheer Rogers on. Most readers deplore domestic violence and take satisfaction in the fact that Pym is now on the receiving end of unchecked rage. It seems a bit like poetic justice or karma. When Pym was insecure and angry, he lashed out in violence and now he gets to experience this behavior from the other side. In fact the blow he

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9 Fans of comic books will recognize Fury’s public relations specialist Betty Ross. In nearly every title featuring the Hulk, Ross was a love interest of Bruce Banner.
receives is remarkable similar to the one he gave his wife. This moment is, however, more complex.

Pym refuses to fight back. Rogers assaults him, punching him six times before he finally decides to retaliate. Furthermore, we were able to witness the altercation between husband and wife. It’s true that Hank hit Janet first and that this is inexcusable. However, his immediate reaction was regret and apology. Janet retaliated thrice before he lashed out in total rage. Of course none of this excuses the violence and I’m not defending Pym’s actions. Regardless of how things unfolded, Pym was guilty of crossing boundaries of civility. However, Captain America is responding to a crime with the same criminal behavior. This is especially problematic when we consider Captain America’s name literally, that is when we remain mindful of his traditional function as the symbolic embodiment of the national ideal.

The major difference here is sex. Hank is male and Janet is female. In the minds of many, there is a difference between assaulting women and assaulting men. While I understand this objection, I choose to overlook it for several reasons. First, violence is violence and qualifying it according to status of the victim is problematic. Such action leads to a system that differentiates between worthy and unworthy victims. Herman and Chomsky speak about such a phenomenon in relationship to their propaganda model. They write that, “A propaganda system will consistently portray people abused in enemy states as worthy victims, whereas those treated with equal or greater severity by its own government or clients will be unworthy. (37). Herman and Chomsky were referring to media coverage and international policy, yet the concept transfers easily, especially when, as mentioned above, we recall that Captain America has a history of embodying an entire nation, which brings us to another important dimension of the text, the metonymic function.

Much of the focus so far has been on how simplistic binaries are complicated through revision of character. However, because these characters are symbolic icons, such complications extend beyond the individual. This metonymic dimension is clearest in the figure of Captain America.

What the assault on Hank Pym reveals is the premeditated retaliation for a crime with an equal offense. Motive and action are at odds. There is no doubt that Rogers has good intentions, but these intentions are out of date and overly simplistic. In the world of the Ultimates, Rogers was accidentally frozen after a battle with the Nazis. He was
discovered and revived by S.H.I.E.L.D. Thus what we have in this showdown between heroes is an indictment of both the World War II comic book morality that Captain America represents and contemporary political policy. After all, many see post 911, American foreign policy as aggression, action equivalent to the deeds of the terrorists who destroyed the World Trade Center.

In this fight between Rogers and Pym we see a glimpse of the way political discourse is being moved beyond the televised, partisan arguments so adeptly deflated by Jon Stewart on *Crossfire*. The reader’s identification with iconic figures in conflict forces the individual to occupy both positions rather than one. George Lakoff reminds us that “political leaders and ideologues…try to get voters to become coherent in their views-to move to one pole or the other, that is, to be entirely liberal or entirely conservative” (15-16). The comic book asks us to be both. In the confrontation described above we bring our preconceived ideas of Captain America to the text and our ideological identification is challenged by the division of the action. We both relish and squirm at the violent actions of the superhero and in doing so, our thinking is forced to move beyond easy dichotomies of right and wrong.

I mentioned above that Millar fractures reader identification in two ways. The example of conflict between Giant-Man, Wasp, and Captain America reveals how Burkean identification and division are internalized within individual characters. Now let’s look at how such tension operates on the larger level, the relationships among team members.

The best place to begin is with the character Thor. In the first chapter, I demonstrated how comic books of previous decades are best decoded by employing Jameson’s dialectic approach. As the example of the super hero reformer demonstrated, quite often the surface message of the text was at odds with suppressed ideology. As the second world war arrived, many comic book titles began to surface ideology with the result that many titles published during this era were pieces of blatant propaganda. For many years one of these two approaches to comic books could be guaranteed to provide a satisfactory reading of the text. The character of Thor in *The Ultimates* provides a clear example of how many comic book are demanding new approaches to reading and understanding. These texts operate more according to Bakhtinian principles of heteroglossia.

According to Bakhtin, unitary language is the product of struggle and domination.
One language asserts itself as official, as the true language of society (“The Dialogic Imagination” 271). Although I would hesitate to label contemporary political discourse as unitary, dominant media seems to be stuck in a binary model, with two paradigms struggling for dominance. However, unitary language is punctured by heteroglossia, or a variety of dialects, sociolects and idiolects. In “Discourse In The Novel,” Bakhtin uses excerpts from Dickens’ *Little Dorrit* to demonstrate this principle of composition that slips from voice to voice. In other words, multiple voices/utterances are woven together. (303-304). Reflecting on the comic novel, Bakhtin writes that

The primary source of language usage in the comic novel is a highly specific treatment of “common language.” This “common language” – usually the average norm of spoken and written language for a given social group- is taken by the author precisely as the *common view*, as the verbal approach to people and things normal for a given sphere of society… To one degree or another, the author distances himself from this common language, he steps back and objectifies it, forcing his own intentions to refract and diffuse themselves through the medium of this common view that has become embodied in language…The relationship of the author to a language conceived as the common view is not static—it is always found in a state of movement and oscillation that is more or less alive (301-302).

This is a dense quotation and requires some unpacking. According to Bakhtin, the author of the novel uses heteroglossia as a filter for his or her own perspective. The narrative agenda is filtered through the appropriation and employment of the dialect of the common people and in the process it becomes complex and more dialogic. The narrative style of contemporary comic books and graphic novels employs this concept slightly differently.

Although I hesitate to assume the total absence of authorial intention, the printed text of these volumes are almost entirely comprised of dialogue. Comics of earlier decades typically incorporated passages of exposition that guided the reader through an authorized interpretation of the text. With these excised, the narrative text is comprised of individuals in conversation. A comparative examination of a pages from *The Avengers* and *The Ultimates* nicely illustrates how contemporary comic books and graphic novels are moving away from the unitary, authorized interpretations generated by expository
captions to become more polyvalent texts.

Comic books have always been uniquely positioned to employ heteroglossia. After all, figures are drawn and virtually all printed words appear in the form of dialogue. Conventional novels also use dialogue, but there is usually a dominant narrative voice that presents a single perspective that frames the dialogue. Comic books achieved this effect through the use of expositional captions. The image below shows grief stricken Avengers in the hospital where the injured Wasp is struggling from injuries received in battle.

Five of the six panels on this page contain expositional captions that guide the reader through the processing of information. In these images Giant Man (Pym) loses his temper, essentially assaulting the doctor in charge of the Wasp’s care. The exposition, however, assures the audience that this behavior is not dangerous or typical, that it is the product of extreme grief for a loved one. The images do convey this message, but there are alternative ways to process the moment. For example, Giant Man never apologizes to the doctor for losing control. In fact, the motion lines in panel fourth panel seem to indicate that the doctor was let go with sudden force, not care. The elimination or use of different exposition could send more conflicted messages to readers and it would be possible to read the superheroes character as rash or unreasonable rather than simply grief-stricken. In comparison, let’s examine a page from The Ultimates, a page that uses no exposition.

Although his motives for attempting to recruit Thor are nebulous, Nick Fury, accompanied by Bruce Banner, flies to Norway to meet with the Norse God. The Thunder God, however, is cynical and suspicious of the American official and does not hesitate to voice his opinions about U.S. policy. Recall once again that although comic books have always held potential to examine complicated issues by incorporating dialogue of numerous individuals, most comic books failed to maximize this potential, voicing alternative perspectives only through villains. The majority of disagreements functioned on this level, with the misguided being defeated by the champions of virtue and right. As witnessed above, expositional captions accompanied virtually every frame, further guiding readers through the approved interpretation of the text. Various industry codes of self censorship ensured that a strong, unitary voice was clear to all audiences. For example, the first industry attempt to monitor and regulate content was implemented in 1948 by the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers (ACMP).
The ACMP code contained six general provisions. The first, and most important, placed restrictions on the presentation of crime, stating that lawbreaking should not be depicted in a manner that would “throw sympathy against the law and justice or to inspire others the desire for imitation.” It also declared that policemen, judges, government officials, and “respected institutions should not be portrayed as stupid, ineffective, or represented in such a way as to weaken respect for established authority.” (Wright 103).

The ACMP code was abandoned, but later industry standards operated by remarkably similar standards. What makes the meeting shown above between Fury and Thor so remarkable is that a respected and powerful government official is being challenged openly by a hero, not a villain. Thor even goes so far as to cast aspersions on Fury. The meeting ends with the following exchange. Fury comments “What about that interview you gave on 60 Minutes, Thor? I thought you were here to save the world?” (88). Thor responds by claiming “Oh, I am here to save the world. General Fury. Save it from people like you” (88).

**Why Comic Books?**

In the previous pages I examined the rhetorical function of the comic book. Although I’ve never made claims of exclusivity for the medium, a question remains unanswered. If comic books are one site that facilitates multiple perspectives, if the medium is now operating in a heteroglossic fashion and engaging in social and political debate that resists the polarizing impulses of the mainstream mass media, what makes this possible? In simple terms, what makes comics special? Part of the answer to this question can be found in an examination of the business model of comic book publishing. For the rest of the answer, we must turn to the characteristics of the medium itself.

Comic books and graphic novels are products of popular culture and as such they operate according to a specific set of interests. Namely, they succeed by pleasing the consumer. Perhaps this is an obvious statement. However, it’s an important idea to remember because it reveals much about the rhetorical power of entertainment. In order to better understand how comic book publishing differs from other media, it may be helpful to first understand how mass media operates.

In *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky meticulously describe a propaganda model of the media. In
the new introduction included in the 2002 edition of the text, Herman and Chomsky observe that “among their other functions, the media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them. The representatives of these interests have important agendas and principles that they want to advance, and they are well positioned to shape and constrain media policy” (xi). The mass media are corporate entities and are in business to make a profit and for this they rely to a degree on the interest of the public. However, they are more interested in the investments of advertisers.\footnote{Advertising isn’t the only factor that influences the mass media. According to Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model, information passes through a series of “filters” on its way to the public. However, for the purposes of this thesis, advertising is the primary factor.}

The power of advertisers over television programming stems from the simple fact that they buy and pay for the programs—they are the ‘patrons’ who provide the media subsidy. As such, the media compete for their patronage, developing specialized staff to solicit advertisers and necessarily having to explain how their programs serve advertisers needs. The choices of these patrons greatly affect the welfare of the media, and the patrons become what William Evan calls ‘normative reference organizations,’ whose requirements and demands the media must accommodate if they are to succeed (Herman and Chomsky 16).

According to the propaganda model then, products like television are more concerned with keeping powerful investors happy. Because of this, they adapt their programming accordingly, tooling content in ways that demonstrate a return on advertiser investments. The comic book publishing industry is also a business and partially beholden to the interests of investors and stock holders. However, they are more intimately connected to the response of readers.

Comic books of other decades often contained letters to the editor sections. Readers of all sorts were encouraged to write to the publishers expressing their opinions. For example, around 1965 when the United States was considering intervention in Vietnam, readers wrote to Marvel suggesting that Captain America ought to go as well. Others asked that he stay out…While Captain America said little about Vietnam, the letters to the editor became a forum for prowar and antiwar readers to debate political issues…Stan Lee affirmed that the
great majority of readers polled by Marvel wanted the hero to stay out of Vietnam” (Wright 244).

Not only did Marvel encourage readers to engage in dialogue about contemporary social and political issues, they adjusted the content of the books accordingly. Captain America did not go to war in Vietnam the way he had during World War II. Such history shows that the industry has a long tradition of trying to serve the interests of the public rather than those of private investors or advertisers.

The incident described above shows how Marvel listened to readers and ultimately tailored content according to the dominant view of readers. New titles are taking this one step further. Debates no longer take place in isolated letter sections. Instead, they have been moved to the narratives and images of the product itself. It may be the result of clever marketing, the attempt to appeal to the broadest fan base possible, but comics have found ways to include the views of all readers. The result is the heteroglossia outlined above.

Publishers are still keenly interested in the viewpoints of audiences. In the chapter that follows, I look closely at one site for the expression of these sentiments, the online fan forums.
Chapter 3  
Fan Reception: Active Audiences and Resistance

In the previous chapters, I examined the history of the comic book superhero figure and his/her rhetorical function. I have shown how post 911 revisions of classic characters have altered the function of the superhero, moving these iconic figures beyond their former primary role as vehicles for idealized morality and patriotic propaganda. New comic writers and artists are reinventing iconic figures, complicating morality, and deploying highly recognizable figures as significant tools for negotiating the ambivalence of social experience. This current chapter examines fan reception of The Ultimates.

My project began because I am a fan. While researching a different project, I found myself dreading work, procrastinating by flipping through graphic novels. These books were an ideal distraction. First of all, they allowed me to read in small spurts. I love to read, but academic demands made enjoying novels a guilty pursuit. I could not justify the time required. The graphic novel, on the other hand could be enjoyed in chunks of 40 pages or so. Story arcs typically extend over multiple issues, but it’s all right if large intervals occur between readings. After all, these were originally serial publications and designed to be read over a period of months. The nature of the form allowed me to enter and exit a continuing narrative with relative ease.

Of course, much of my reading was rationalization. I typically did not wait to finish a compilation. The truth is the graphic novel allowed me to revisit a pleasant memory from my youth without having to worry about the hassle of purchasing issues every month. It also eased the anxiety I was encountering, anguish about a project I simply could not manage to get excited about.

Something odd happened. My distraction became an obsession. I began to notice a new complexity in my diversions. I recognized the characters, but the innocent narratives I remembered had been replaced by intelligent social commentary. Excited, I began to entertain notions of turning my diversion into a critical, academic pursuit.

The more I immersed myself in my new obsession, the more excited I became. Not only were these texts more sophisticated and complex than the comic books of my youth, the changes I was discovering were premeditated, not accidental.  

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I realize it is problematic to ascribe all function and meaning of literature to the author. However, comic books have long been viewed as junk literature, insipid products of popular culture. Although these attitudes have been changing, the tendency to view the form as minor remains. For this reason, I felt partially obligated to uncover the intent of the creator.
the previous chapter, the old paragon of moral virtue no longer feels adequate and writers and artists are reinvigorating the superhero comic by complicating the genre. This was what I had detected in *The Ultimates*. The question I want to examine here is how are the fans reacting to these transformations? In the paper that follows, I examine and analyze the activity in online fan discussion forums in order to answer this question.

In this chapter I will review some claims about the nature of digital communication and then look at how such ideas extend to fan discussion boards. Much critical scrutiny has been given to electronic discussion forums. Although many of the scholars I incorporate into my investigation approach the subject with an eye on pedagogy and the classroom, I find that several key observations about technology translate to non-educational environments, such as fan sites. Specifically, I will consider the ways in which the forum section of comicbookresources.com, an internet site devoted to bringing together fans of this popular and unique literature, creates a space for dialogue about morality and politics. It is my belief that there are conversations occurring here that are collaborative and questioning, conversations that resist uniform or authorized readings of culture and provide opportunity for intellectual resistance and critical interpretations of the real world.

**Plurality of Voices**

In “Who Needs Politics? Who Needs People?: The Ironies of Democracy in Cyberspace,” Roger Hurwitz accurately recalls that “Cyberspace was imagined alternatively as an ‘electronic frontier,’ where free thought and egalitarian associations transcend political boundaries and an ‘electronic commons,’ where netizens discuss issues and influence decision makers who are listening” (*Contemporary Sociology* 655). Numerous scholars have chronicled the problems associated with attributing overly optimistic characteristics to online democracy. The general consensus is that “it is naïve to depict cyberspace as a frontier or commons where state power can be resisted” (Hurwitz 656). The degree of merit assigned to this declaration depends on the usage of the term resistance. If resistance is defined as a form of direct action against the state or the implementation of policy change, then Hurwitz’ claim seems quite reasonable. If, however, we define resistance, in part, as an active process of questioning and

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12 Such problems include issues of access, particularly the unequal distribution of resources, a significant concern when considering the race and education level of computer users. Although I acknowledge such problems here, an attempt to fully analyze the issue of access would demand more space than this project allows.
reevaluating experience, as an intellectual process, then I submit that online communities can function as sites for nuanced management of collective social experience and that these communities can afford opportunities for citizens to voice opinions that find little room in the polarized mass media.

I align myself here with Lester Faigley who, while summarizing the scholarship of Jean-Francois Lyotard, writes in "The Achieved Utopia of the Networked Classroom," that "Lyotard sees the grand narratives of the Enlightenment as having illegitimately monopolized the discourse of philosophy, and he would replace these narratives with a plurality of voices" (185). Faigley continues to extend Lyotard's thinking to the classroom, providing a critical look at the use of synchronous conferencing technology in learning environments. However, such thinking is easily transferred to online fan forums. As Faigley observes, "students are often shocked to find that other students arrive at different interpretations from theirs, even from readings of seemingly transparent, commonplace texts. Thus they are forced to negotiate those meanings with other students" (186). I see no reason why such a phenomenon should be limited to the academic classroom, and in the sections that follow, I apply Faigley's observations to the internet fan discussion board.

**Resistance and Dissent**

In "Computer Conferences and Learning: Authority, Resistance, and Internally Persuasive Discourse," Marilyn M. Cooper and Cynthia L. Selfe maintain that not only do electronic conferencing technologies stimulate peer interaction and group learning, they "encourage students to resist, dissent, and explore the role that controversy and intellectual divergence play in learning and thinking" (849). As with my application of Faigley's work, in the text that follows, I apply Cooper and Selfe's theory to the online discussion board.

**Critique of Meaning**

Finally, I examine ideas presented by Ann Margaret McKillop and Jamie Myers in "The Pedagogical and Electronic Contexts of Composing in Hypermedia." I examine the ways in which the internet discussion board enacts "critical theory in hypermedia...to foster critique about the potential meanings of texts" (68).

**Borders of Examination/Methodology**
There are many fan forums operating on the net. The nature of this particular project required making choices. I want to stress here that this is in no way intended to be a comprehensive study of a particular community. My intention is to closely examine two instances of online discussion. There are many fans operating online and they are engaging in a wide variety of discourses. My examination is about potential. The threads I consider provide specific examples of ways these discussion boards function.

Although I’m not conducting an official study of particular online communities, I did want the site I visited to be a popular one. On the Google home page, I simply typed in the words “comic book.” The first website listed was comicbookresources.com. The description indicated that this was a gathering place for fans and not an online retailer of comics. In addition, its high profile status ensured high traffic.

A visit to the site revealed that it was well organized and easy to use. Sections are grouped in a sensible way, arranged in clusters under the headings “CBR News,” “Columns,” “Community,” “Resources,” and “About / MISC.” My examination takes place on the message boards, a portion located in the “Community” section. However, before I proceed, let me first say a few words about my decision to quote these posts as published texts, how I based this decision on the usage rules for the site.

The bottom of the home page has a link to the site’s privacy policy. There I found the following statement.

**Public Forums**

This site makes chat rooms and message boards available to its users. Please remember that any information that is disclosed in these areas becomes public information and you should exercise caution when deciding to disclose your personal information.

[Click here to read the entire privacy policy.](#)

I realize that internet users often neglect to read these privacy statements. In fact, there may be some problems with design involved. The link to these policies is quite small and situated at the very bottom of the rather long home page. I had some ethical qualms about simply assuming that all users had taken the time to read and digest these policies. Such

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13 The information provided online indicates that Comic Book Resources is an independent entity without official ties to a particular publisher. It should be noted, however, that this site is quite polished and professional and even has a section that features columns contributed by major creative talents in the industry.
reservations might have prompted me to attempt to contact administrators and users before extracting information or using quotes. However, another characteristic of the site persuaded me that this was not necessary.

Click here to visit the Comic Book Resources home page

Clicking on the community link brought me to the forums. I chose not to establish myself as a user. Despite this, all posts, as the disclaimer above warns, were available to view. Because of this fact, I have chosen to make a basic assumption about the users of these discussion boards. I am operating under the assumption that although many users may not take the time to read the official privacy statement, the functional design of the forum communicates its public nature. The only barrier I faced was that I had to be a registered user to post to the forum. Since this was never my intention, I proceeded with my examination and my textual analysis of fan’s reactions to the changes in character in The Ultimates.

Because this is a high traffic site, I’ve decided to limit focus to threads specifically referring to the Ultimates. The first thread I looked at was named “Most Ultimate Titles are Getting Worse… (agree or disagree?).” This thread was created on 2 February, 2006 by a user whom I will call “Sharpshooter” and caught my eye for a variety of reasons. The user was clearly requesting dialogue and diverse opinions. The statement, although opinionated, was civil. I was impressed with the fact that there seemed to be a genuine interest in the opinions of others. Finally, the thread was provocative. It promised to ask questions that directly corresponded to my personal research. In short, this thread was the ideal place to begin.

Sharpshooter establishes his post with the following observation.

Most of the titles in the Ultimate Universe are getting worse. Examples? Ultimate Spider-Man is the most clear. Though still a great book, it's not as good as it used to be. Ultimate Fantastic Four hasn't really gotten better or worse. I haven't read the earlier Ultimate X-Men issues, but I hear they're alright, so that hasn't changed much either. However, the Ultimates seem to be getting both better and worse (IMO). I like all the new,

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14 The disclaimer above indicates that information on the site is in the public domain. However, I realize that many internet users have a strong personal investment in their online personas. For this reason, I have assigned pseudonyms to users. Names come from my personal interests, and although quirky, have been assigned randomly.

15 Excerpts from discussion threads have not been corrected. Grammar and punctuation appears exactly as on the site itself.
interesting plot twists and developments, but it's like everybody's a bad
guy now. Nobody is an honest to goodness, downright hero anymore (not
even Cap). Nobody has good morals, and stands for true justice. They're
all just a buch o' swearin' jerks!! I think that's what makes the Ultimates
seem like it's not so great anymore. That's why I like Spidey; at least he
has good morals (though he swears, too). What do you think? I know alot
of people will say the Ultimates is, like, the best, but that's because the
swearin' and bad additudes and immorality doesn't bother most people. I
just can't stand it! 😒 (Comic Book Resources).
This dismayed fan speaks straight to the heart of the matter. For decades, comic book
superheroes were, for the most part, paragons of moral virtue. That isn’t to say that
comics were all sunshine and smiles. It’s impossible to generalize the form. Many
different artists and writers have worked in the field and each has a unique talent and
vision. There have always been bitter and cynical titles lurking on the magazine stand.
However, the dominant trend of the form has been rather formulaic. As Bradford W.
Wright observes "formulas that appeal to audiences tend to proliferate and endure, while
those that do not, do neither. As a means through which changing values and assumptions
are packaged into mass commodities, formulas are the consequence of determining
pressures exerted by producers and consumers, as well as by the historical conditions
affecting them both" (xv). As shown in previous chapters, the general formula of the
superhero comic book established clear boundaries between good and bad. Furthermore,
the forces of good typically triumphed over the corrupt. Heroes were morally as well as
physically superior to the ordinary humans they safeguarded. It is this idealized world
that Sharpshooter is referring to in the above lament, the universe of the personified
moral model.

A close study of the responses to this thread is interesting. There are many
insubstantial posts that indicate a mild agreement or disagreement. However, these
contributions to the discussion typically either offer no reason for disapproval or seem to
be using different criteria. In essence, these posts mildly state unsupported personal
preference and don’t seem concerned with the vanished morality that so troubles
Sharpshooter. These responses, though perhaps interesting in their own way, are not my
main concern here. Instead, I want to turn my attention to those replies that do respond to
Sharpshooter’s specific concern. Below is an edited transcript of responses to Sharpshooter’s thread. As mentioned, I have been selective and reproduce only those replies that seem to be addressing the embedded concern of the topic, the issue of superhero morality. Although I’ve been selective about which responses I include, I have not disrupted the chronology of replies. In other words, each posting follows the reply above it. It is my hope that this strategy will help retain a sense of the actual progression of the dialogue. In addition, I have not significantly edited responses. With small exception, replies included here are exactly as they appear online. The only liberty I take, is trimming certain replies. Since my primary concern is with a particular title, I have cut some posts off when the focus drifts to other titles in the ultimate line.

**Borgnine:** Well, you pretty much nailed it with your last sentence. Things like that don't bother people anymore. Though I admit, I like it when there's at least one character present who isn't in the habit of swearing. But the Ultimate verse is supposed to be taking place in this timeline. Not only does swearing and being cynical not bother people anymore--it's common. Well, that was redundant. But the reason that it doesn't bother people is because most people do it. Put people in a stressful situation (and I think being a hero is that) and nine times out of ten, you'll hear some colorful four-letter words. So for the characters to talk like that is a bit more realistic. Because no one says "Golly gee" or "Holy rusted metal!" anymore...

**Monet:** I have to give it to the Ultimates because it seems the most real. I would put Spider-Man at second, X-Men at third and FF dead last. FF just doesn't seem all that interesting. They all started fairly strong but I think they have plateau'd. Could they be on going on a downward slope? It was interesting to see the new revamp of the Marvel Universe. But, there is only so many characters that can be ultimatized before it becomes boring.

**Alexander:** Just because someone swears doesn't make them a bad person. I imagine you'd be pretty foul mouth if your day consisted of getting shot at, fighting off aliens, keeping telepaths out of your head, having genetically mutated goblins try to kill you and so forth. The Ultimate universe is going to be dirtier. And not everyone in ultimates is a badguy, just most of them. Thor is a good guy. And as for captain america,
it makes more sense for him to be a bit down about trying to deal with being frozen for 60 years than for him to just get woken up be perfectly adjusted to all the changes. Pretty much everyone he knows is dead and the ones that aren't are getting there quick. The world has changed and he's just not use to it. When he's not fighting he doesn't feel useful.

In these selected responses to Sharpshooter’s thread, the dialogue begins by commenting on the reason for the moral concerns. Users are careful not to invalidate the objection of the thread’s creator. In fact, many of them express sympathy or agreement with the initial sentiment, the concern about profanity and heroic character. However, they qualify the situation by connecting the book’s environment to purpose, the fact that the title is intended to be a more realistic reflection of current times.

The posts above present a problem. Specifically, there seems to be a tendency for some users to invest a disproportionate amount of identification in a single character. Recall that Sharpshooter (the thread’s creator) takes time to praise Spider Man. Later, Alexander singles out Thor as a personal favorite. Such moments threaten to undermine my claim from Chapter 2 that these texts encourage readers to invest portions of themselves in multiple characters of differing perspectives. Could it be that there is a flaw in the process of identification? Does identification (or the iconic figure of the superhero) encourage or invite centripetal rather than centrifugal readings of texts? There does seem to be such potential. However, it would be a mistake to not note the other dimensions of this discussion board. The superhero figure does foster fierce loyalty among readers. However, many users of this discussion forum demonstrate the ability to move beyond such loyalties.

It’s important to note that, rather than invest all energy in a single favorite character, many users possess the ability to reconcile conflicting attitudes and opinions. Such an ability seems a precious skill in today’s highly charged political climate. Recall that contemporary political discourses suffer from exaggerated partisanship. As George Lakoff observes in *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, “liberals and conservatives have very different moral systems, and…much of the political discourses of conservatives and liberals derives from their moral systems” (11). In addition to unitary identification, there are echoes of polarization in this online community. However, the strength is diminished. For example, Wolverine’s comment reveals the
ability to both agree and disagree. He expresses his admiration for the series by commenting on verisimilitude, but he concedes that there is merit in Sharpshooter’s observation, wondering if the new universe may be declining. Although Alexander’s sympathies clearly point to a single character (Thor), his post extends this dualistic thinking by expressing admiration for two radically different characters, Thor and Captain America. As mentioned in the last chapter, Thor is the embodiment of anti-hegemonic resistance. Captain America, although conflicted, is still the embodiment of patriotism. Despite this fact, Alexander demonstrates the ability to understand and admire both characters; in a sense he values the ambiguity in which we all find ourselves. In the real world, in mainstream media, such valuing of ambiguity is rare. As Jon Stewart reminded Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson on *Crossfire*, too often commercial media simplifies issues to binary pro/con, right/left debates.

I’m reminded of Faigley’s observation that individuals are often surprised that there are opinions other than their own. In his application of Lyotard’s conception of plurality of voices, Faigley writes "I would argue that electronic written discussions create disensus because they give voice to diversity" (190). This may be the case in this forum. As noted above, community forum users are quite comfortable with, even embrace disensus. This is a phenomenon rare in contemporary political and moral discussions. Of course, the inspiration for the discussion helps minimize tension. These participants are all fans of the titles being discussed. Users are enthusiasts and it’s a safe bet that the primary attitude is that this is a site to discuss a hobby. Furthermore, the fact that all users share this passion, makes bold claims about diversity a bit suspect. After all, as the site’s media kit reveals, the overwhelming majority of users are males around the age of 24.

The demographics indicate a strong sense of commonality among users. However, the information is incomplete. No statistics about race or sexual orientation are provided. Likewise, there are no indicators of political affiliation, something rather important to this current project. Adequately addressing these issues is beyond the scope of this text-based project. The absence of such information is problematic, of that there is no question. However, I see no way to collect such data without raising suspicion. After all, in the minds of many, such details are irrelevant to the activity of this site.

It is important to remember that although correlations are often made between political affiliation and, sexual orientation, skin color, or gender, belief systems are
distributed across wide varieties. Despite the information provided in the demographics table above, there is no reason to think that users on this site are ideologically identical. Since politics and morality are not predetermined by physiology or sexuality, a cautious assertion that there is ideological diversity present seems valid.

The design of the site seems to foster ideological diversity and it is here that Faigley’s claims about electronic discourse and disensus seem valid. For example, while perusing the board I found a sticky post about the forum rules. Many of the rules are typical. There is the standard warning against soliciting, the polite request for links rather than articles and the reminder to observe general "netiquette." However, the last item on the list is revealing. It reads,

9. Keep it in the Proper Context. The Ultimate titles have worked to be more culturally "relevant" than their regular Marvel Universe counterparts and especially in THE ULTIMATES, political issues arise. Feel free to discuss them in the context of the story and involving the characters as much as you can. Too much thread drift and it will be moved to the Community Board. (Comic Book Resources).

This statement reveals a high level of political awareness as well as an appreciation for the nature of the content of the Ultimates book. In addition, there is a deliberate effort to encourage civil debate and disagreement. The debate about morality does not remain confined to its relationship to politics. Equally fascinating is the way these responses quickly turn to an interrogation of the concept of morality itself. Comic books were the impetus for the discussion, but the debate quickly turns to issues of history and language.

**Raindog:** It's not like bad language is a new thing. I think it's just a more realistic approach to "people being put in a stressful situation," using four letter words....as you say.I seriously doubt guys in World War I were saying "golly gee" in combat situations. "Cussing like a sailor" is quite an old phrase.

**Mifune:** I agree with you about the hero thing and the morals thing, everyone has to be a little twisted in some way to make it "real". Although I am not the expert on the Ultimate Universe, Ultimate Cap seems to be the only one close to being a true "I'm going to do the right thing" hero
(but I kinda like the "you deserve to get your ass kicked if you cross the line, side).

**Borgnine:** Swearing is not new, sure, but it's use in a mainstream media like comics is fairly new, in the scheme of things. Sure, WWII soldiers "swore like sailors" but the media at the time couldn't show such things. It's more recent, say, past couple of decades, that cursing has been allowed in any comic published by one of the Big Two. Quote: Point taken, but swearing was only a fraction of what I was saying. I know most people don't mind it, and it doesn't bug me too much (it's mostly the immorality that bugs me), but as a Christian, I think the excessive swearing is a bit bothersome (albeit, realistic). But this is beside the point of this thread. All I mean to say is that USM and Ultimates are getting worse (IMO). As a Christian, I suppose I hear ya. My problem is that characters constantly seem ready to leap into bed with one another, but it's less evident in Universe than 616. Or, at least, with Ulti-X-men. I'll admit, that's the only Ultimate comic I read, but I do plan on doing some catching up in the Barnes and Noble cafe over summer... But in that, I haven't noticed too much swearing. I'd also rather a character's dialogue keep with the character. I'm a Christian. I'm fairly certain Wolverine is not. I wouldn't expect him to keep a reign on his tongue. And so on (which makes me a hypocrite, I guess, because a character's sexual practices should keep with the character as well, but dangit, I'd like to see one Marvel relationship in recent years where a couple actually waited until getting married...)

**Jiffypop:** I hear what you're sayin' man. I agree to an extent. Being a graduate of a very conservative seminary, I have spent a lot of time reflecting and reading about the changes in our culture. I often have to stand back from the culture and reevaluate who I am and where I stand in my moral convictions. But, that's what I like about the Ultimates. You have Hank, who has beat his wife in the past, yet he is trying to atone for his sins. Nick treats people like dirt at times and has to juggle if the ends justify the means, yet in the annual, it's clear that his one simple motive is to keep the country safe. So, I really do think, at the heart level, they're still the golden boys (and girls) that you are looking for, just with a lot
more moral ambiguities to deal with (after all, it is reflective of the real world.) I just think that our generation is more honest than the ones previous. Not better and in many ways not worse. Just more honest than that of the golden or silver age audience. Plus, with the Ultimates, Millar ALWAYS lets the good prevail. Cap, Thor, and Iron Man will come out as heroes, signing autographs, posing for pics- just watch.

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www.believetoreason.com

There is much happening here. As observed above, Cooper and Selfe stress “the role that controversy and intellectual divergence play in learning and thinking (849). First, we can see users struggling (a bit awkwardly) to define morality. The dialogue is unwieldy, but there is exploration taking place. Users discuss issues like fidelity, atonement and righteous violence. Also, it seems significant that it is during this shift in the discourse that many users begin inserting strategic interruptions, such as Jiffypop’s insertion of the link to his personal page dedicated to the theology and the work of Saint Augustine. Of course there is a slight problem. Many of the discussions stall, and never seem to resume. This particular thread, for example, was pushed over time to the website’s archives, a storage unit rarely searched by users who are continually looking to keep up on the latest discussions and developments.

The last post to the discussion thread mentioned above was added on 20 April, 2006 and these abandoned discussions are problematic. What good is this alternative discourse, this ability to think about morality and politics in ways that resist the polarized patterned narratives so prevalent in mainstream media if the explorations simply stop? Perhaps the answer can be found in Faigley’s observations about the power of resisting closure.

Writing about his experiences with networked discussions Faigley comments, But classes do not come to a definitive end because each comment always raises the potential for another response. By sharing experiences of interpretation over a semester, most students come to acknowledge that the terms in which we understand experience are not fixed but vary according to our personal histories and are always open to new possibilities for creating meaning (184).
I would argue that such possibility is also within reach here on this fan discussion board. I mentioned above that this examination was about possibility. I now return to this idea. The users of comicbookresources.com may temporarily lose interest in their interrogations of politics, ethics and morality. However, there is potential for conversations to resume, for new users to drift in, pick up the thread and contribute unique perspectives. In addition, although I’ve limited my examination to a single thread, there is a good deal of overlap in posts. Discussions may be taken to other threads and continued there.

In *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky describe the propaganda model of mainstream media. In their introduction they write “It is our view that, among their other functions, the media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them. The representatives of these interests have important agendas and principles that they want to advance, and they are well positioned to shape and constrain media policy” (xi). The agendas of these powerful interests push for closure, for the definitive perspective. Users at comicbookresources.com have no such interests directly influencing their time on the site. Even if the thread isn’t resumed, users engaged in discussions that resisted uniform or authorized accounts of politics and morality. The fact that there is no closure should be read as a positive step, for discussions ended without consensus or final word. I think that where these particular topics are concerned this is a positive step.
**Coda: Where do we stand?**

When I began this project, I had high hopes. A combination of political frustration and enduring defensiveness about a private reading pleasure had created a strong urge to craft a defense of a segment of a particular medium that I’ve often found undervalued and misunderstood. My purpose was to show how sophisticated superhero comic books can be, to reveal how supposed anachronistic figures can process current events in ways that are richly layered and often more complex than conventional media. Furthermore, I had hoped to discover fans both understanding and extending these comic book treatments of contemporary political affairs. Was this an ambitious set of goals? Perhaps. Have I succeeded? Only partially.

**Problem One: The Individual vs. the Community**

I briefly mentioned the fact that in the online discussion boards, many users tended to invest identification quite heavily in single, or favorite, characters. Though I want to resist the possibility that comic books may possess a strong invitation to such centripetal readings, I must confess that the possibility remains. This potential is problematized further by the fact that, although contemporary audiences of comic books seem to reflect more diversity when contrasted to the readers of the medium’s history, available data indicates that the average reader is still of a particular type, an adult white male in his mid-twenties.16

Although contemporary titles have made enlightened attempts at inclusion, there are few strong signals that audience diversity follows character diversity. This could mean that complex discussions of social and political policy that do occur circulate only among a rather narrow core group of fans. Issues such as these do give me pause and cause me to doubt my initial optimism for the medium as an alternative site for a more nuanced management of social experience.

**Problem Two: Keeping “On Topic”**

I mentioned above that the forum seems to reflect a high level of political awareness, an understanding of the intimate connection between particular comic books

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16 Audience demographics is another area that needs further intensive research. I do not believe that comic books deliberately exclude certain readers. In fact, the history of the form is full of conscious attempts at inclusion, efforts to appeal to a broader, more diverse readership. Early attempts were awkward and misguided, resulting in the creation of racial and sexist stereotypes. However, persistence has yielded stronger results and today’s comic books possess fully developed characters of every race who possess a variety of heritages, value systems and sexual orientations. Despite this, readers are, to a large extent, rather similar.
and social and political policies of the physical world. I also asserted that debate and
discussion of such issues is encouraged. I stand by this observation. However, there are
problems to consider. For example, in addition to recognizing the connection between the
texts and the real world, the structure of the forums demands that users stay on topic, that
discussions remain in so-called proper context. To me, this context includes the current
socio-political climate of the United States. However, the forum doesn’t seem to agree.
They ask that conversations straying too far from the texts be moved to segregated areas
on the Community Board. We could view this as a positive move. After all, at least such
discussions are not expressly forbidden. However, the idea that certain conversations are
suitable only for designated areas has a discouraging tone and I can’t help wondering
how many debates die as a result of frustration with such regulations before relocating.

The initial attraction of this particular website is that it is a resource for fans of
comic books. Users less excited by politics may discover an interest as issues arise during
the course of discussion. Such fans may never feel compelled to visit the segregated
forums. This not only restricts the ability of fans to fully utilize the medium’s potential
for collective management of social experience, but it also potentially reduces the number
of participants engaging in such discussions. Under these circumstances, strong
personalities could dominate discourse creating an environment that is as unitary or
polarized as any other medium. The questions then are these. Was my founding premise
foolishly optimistic? There is compelling evidence that creators are using comic books
and graphic novels to interrogate the current political climate, but are these efforts
missing their mark? Am I attempting to will into being something that wasn’t truly
present?

There May be Hope

Although I want to acknowledge and consider the problems that my above
examination of The comic book/ graphic novel discovered, I should state that the
situation isn’t completely grim. Online fan discussion forums warrant further scrutiny.
The limited survey presented here simply scrapes the surface. However, the threads
above show a variety of responses. For every fan solely preoccupied with the psychology
of a favorite character, for every fan uninterested in

politics or making connections between the texts and his personal environment, there is
someone considering the larger picture. Take the following thread as an example. On
June 4, a user of Comic Book Resources created the thread titled, “Ultimates – Anti-American?” Like the thread examined earlier, conversations occurring here occasionally veer into issues of individual character. However, certain users continue to push for examination of larger issues. The user responsible for the following response prominently displays his pseudonym here. As mentioned above, I’ve chosen to eliminate user names from this paper. With this small exception, the post below appears unaltered.

For the last time, being "left-wing" and criticizing the U.S. government or its policies domestically or abroad is not anti-American.

"To announce that there must be no criticism of the president, or that we are to stand by the president, right or wrong, is not only unpatriotic and servile, but is morally treasonable to the American public." -- Theodore Roosevelt, editorial in the Kansas City Star; May 7th 1918

“ I hope we shall crush in its birth the aristocracy of our monied corporations which dare already to challenge our government to a trial by strength, and bid defiance to the laws of our country."

-- Thomas Jefferson

Aaron Dixon for U.S. Senate!
Take the Pledge and Vote for Peace!

Green Party of the United States -- Greens: the Real Difference --
Instant Run-Off Voting -- Americans United for Separation of Church and State - Open the Debates! (Comic Book Resources).

As did Jiffypop, this user takes advantage of the forum to direct others to sites that provoke further active engagement in politics. In short, comic books (and discussion forums) do have the potential to nurture citizen critique of and involvement with the socio-political sphere. Not every reader of comics is going to fully utilize the medium's potential for stimulating debate that moves beyond the talking points of partisan ideologues. However, many will. Furthermore, media interact and shape each other. As Marshall McLuhan once observed media, “as extensions of our senses institute new ratios, not only among our private senses, but among themselves, when they interact among themselves. Radio changed the form of the news story as much as it altered the
film image in the talkies. TV caused drastic changes in radio programming, and in the form of the *thing* or documentary novel” (McLuhan 53). Once detected and understood, the visual language of the comic book is seen everywhere. The pictures below demonstrates this fact nicely.

Most of us vividly remember seeing this moment from the early days of the current war in Iraq. Figure 2 shows a crowd of Iraqi’s gathered in a public square apparently celebrating the symbolic toppling of their dictator Saddam Hussein. American soldiers tore down the likeness of the leader and the process was shown repeatedly on virtually every television broadcast. Newspapers everywhere reprinted portions of this triumphant moment.

Think of the number of times we witnessed the statue of Saddam Hussein being torn down. What makes the repetitive images and recognizable symbols of the comic book or graphic novel unique? I would argue that its uniqueness can be found in its abstracted or stylized nature. I’m reminded of Mitchell’s reading of Nelson Goodman presented in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Here Mitchell reminds us that quite often we perceive certain images as “natural.” In other words, when we view photographs or video footage, we sometimes fail to remember that these are strategically framed images. Take the current war in Iraq as an example. Many viewers processed this information as a natural image, a transmission of events *as they occurred*. Others were more dubious. Internet sites like www.informationclearinghouse.info took a more cynical view of this event, one that frames the moment radically differently.

Certain internet sites displayed alternative images like the one below. Here the removal of the statue is interrogated and presented as a hoax. I’ll not make any claims about the validity of this claim. That really isn’t the point. What is fascinating is how the image in figure 3 uses visual language to question and challenge. Visual language calls attention to the rhetorical framing of seemingly natural images. I’ll not dare claim that comic books alone are responsible for the creation of this image. However, as McLuhan notes in the above quote, media interact and shape each other. In this sense, the visual language of the comic book and graphic novel can only continue to encourage the interrogation of supposed natural reality.

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I want to stress here that I am in no way making exclusive claims for a particular medium. As I mentioned in the introduction, I view rigid claims about the structure of media with skepticism. My point here is not that comic books are superior to other media. I simply want to stress that with more abstracted visuals, the tendency to view the image as natural is lessened.
I have attempted to show how comic books and graphic novels can function as vehicles for resistance to overly polarized political dialogue. The intention of certain creative talents working in the medium indicates this. Moreover, although the issue of fan reception requires further investigation, there are strong indicators that some members of the medium’s audience are taking advantage of the opportunity to use the visual language of the comic book to resist dichotomized thinking. This project began with my projecting my political frustration onto one of my hobbies. As the excerpts above demonstrate, there are others doing the same. If my endeavor here suffers from my love of the medium, so be it. I am, in the end, a fan.
Works Consulted


Path: “Civil War” #1 Arrives & We Want Your Thoughts;” Related Articles—“Our Marvels At War.”
