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EDITORIAL

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Re-examining superhero politics in popular culture

ABSTRACT

This Special Issue re-examines the part played by superheroes in contemporary narratives within popular culture. In so doing, it explores how these iconic figures reflect identities and meaning in social, cultural, political and historical contexts.

Superheroes have proliferated and multiplied in the twenty-first century, coming to prominence in comics, film, television and video game industries the same way that their popular narratives had begun to flourish in the comic book industry some eighty years before. Yet, while all of these stories and characters are tethered to these early years of the genre, through iterative retellings and cultural readjustments, superheroes have consistently found renewed life in modern and contemporary re-imaginings. As they have continuously taken different forms and mantles, superheroes have also maintained their ability to reflect our socio-historical and sociopolitical contexts, telling us much about the world we live in, and our desires and anxieties at given moments in time. It is not surprising to see that superheroes have also continued to generate

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a wealth of scholarly interest, with the focus ranging from re-addressing the process of adapting comic book narratives to other forms (Burke 2015; McEnery et al. 2016; Brown 2016; Grant and Henderson 2019; Piatti-Farnell 2021) to considerations of gender and race (Gray and Kaklamanidou 2011; Nama 2011; Kent 2021), and even re-examinations of the superhero *look*, with a focus on costumes (Brownie and Graydon 2016).

The articles in this issue pay particular attention to how superheroes have continued to respond to social, cultural and political issues in our evolving twenty-first-century context, while encompassing a variety of narrative formats within the broader popular culture landscape. Indeed, the articles broadly respond to Robert A. Neymeyer's claim that, 'in the aftermath of 9/11' (Neymeyer 2020: xiii), superheroes have continued to provide 'a reflective lens for society to process tragedy, inspire hope, and tackle serious socio-political issues' (Neymeyer 2020: xiii). While the authors have taken differing approaches to the 'superheroes' label and how it is represented, each have brought to the fore important critical insights as to the part that these highly recognizable icons play in reflecting our evolving identities in our contemporary moment, while also bearing in mind essential historical echoes in the process.

In the first article of the issue, "‘You’re a refugee, are you not?’ ‘Extraordinary bodies’", monstrous outsiders and US refugee policies in superhero comics', Tina Powell examines how Marvel and DC Comics introduced Vietnamese refugees to their comic readership in the early 1980s, specifically through the characters of Karma, Thunder and Lightning. Powell explores how US political rhetoric around South East Asia is reflected in the narratives of *Marvel Team Up* and *New Teen Titans* to explore contrasting poles of thought: 'one as a victim of Communism and anti-democratic/anti-US villains, and the other as a threat to US racial and imperial order' (12 in this issue). Yet, through a close reading of Vietnamese representation within the comics, integrated with a discussion of the wider cultural and political contexts of the period, Powell shows how refugee figures are always cast as outsiders, with the perception of them as 'boat people', 'Yellow Peril' or a 'good refugee', entirely subject to the shifting impulses and directions of contemporary US discourses.

Where Powell unpacks twentieth-century attitudes towards the perceived threat of communism and anti-US sentiment, in 'Superheroes and Nazis: Re-examining the legacy of the Second World War in Eric Kripke's *The Boys*' Abigail Whittall contends that *The Boys* (2019–present) television series is interested in showing how Nazi ideology has persisted into twenty-first-century America. Through exploring the history of superheroes in opposition to Nazis, Whittall considers how the two groups are presented as distinctive, although, when the situation becomes complex and, at times, contradictory, the ensuing ambiguities reflect cultural concerns of the moment, which carries a significant amount of weight in post-9/11 America. Whittall contends that *The Boys*, in expanding on the comic book source material, is a sophisticated satire of this complexity as presented through a capitalist lens; it is both a parody of traditional superheroes and their highly codified ideologies, and a reminder that the same overtly satirical elements can be applied to the rise of contemporary neo-Nazism.

The ways in which refugees and fascism are engaged with in superhero media demonstrates that there is a conscious attempt by creators to have heroes or the messages presented by their heroes explore acceptable cultural behaviours for the society that consumes their texts. However, in 'Storying

species extinction in *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*, Sophie Dungan considers how the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) films of *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo and Russo 2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo and Russo 2019), and related media, show heroes as oblivious to the environmental impact and missed-opportunities of their work. Thanos is the ecoterrorist whose species extinction thesis is dismissed because of his villainous actions, but the anthropocentric world-view that rises to counter him reveals a limited interest in any future possibilities for the environment and anything that is other-than-human. Using ecocritical theory to highlight the prosocial limitations of the superhero genre, Dungan suggests ways in which a foregrounding of real-life global and climate issues can lead to new and revolutionary functions of the superhero, even if it means them taking a step back. Dungan calls attention to how '[s]uperheroes may serve a conservative function as an upholder of the social order' (37 in this issue), which for a macroscopic concept such as planet health is unintentionally constrictive.

In their article, "You don't feel anything?" The Cold War, family affect and reproductive politics in *Black Widow*, Jena DiMaggio turns that same critical line of questioning onto what superhero texts tend to consider to be the smallest connective links in society: the nuclear family. Through a close reading of Marvel's *Black Widow* (Shortland 2021), DiMaggio shows how the heteronormative family is intentionally positioned as both the promise of personal happiness and social value, but in being linked to Cold War sentiment, also demonstrates how western pop culture serves the state's interests in promoting American exceptionalism. For DiMaggio, places like the Red Room are where family ideals are perverted, yet, they are also deflections of the comparable controls placed on western individuals, with liberational potential being limited.

One of the focuses of this special journal issue is in showing how contemporary attitudes can be undercut (intentionally or otherwise) by the actions and beliefs of those within the superhero text. Where DiMaggio applied this scrutiny to female figures through a reconfigured Cold War context, Cathrine Avery, in 'Paternalism, performative masculinity and the post-9/11 cowboy in Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy', uses Batman and his cadre of parental figures to consider heteronormative masculine gender norms through a post-9/11 lens. Being a figure of constraints and excess, Batman's projected identity is full of contradictions. Here, Avery finds the figure of the cowboy to be analogous to concepts of (super)heroic masculinity, which, she contends, is equally constructed, making them a fantastical and problematic site of reflection on evolving American ideals.

Heroes are a mirror of the contexts in which they created and (re)interpreted. As sites of meaning, they can be used to engage with issues concerning refugees, fascism, ecology, families, masculinity and many other aspects that form society and the structures contained within, and by, them. This logic also applies to the development of the media texts themselves. In "We prefer protégé": The temporal function of sidekicks in *Young Justice* and *Titans*, Rusty Hatchell explores how the figure of the superhero sidekick has evolved in line with industrial shifts. These figures serve a narrative function, but they gain agency and liberational independence when they can be adapted into other media forms, such as television. Hatchell demonstrates how if academic focus moves away from the Batman and Robin dynamic, one can examine such positive changes within the superhero genre, with the protégé archetype being emblematic of this newly explored potential.

This issue is brought to its conclusion with a fitting book review. Ruth Barratt-Peacock provides a critical evaluation of *Using Superheroes and Villains in Counseling and Play Therapy: A Guide for Mental Health Professionals* (2020), edited by Lawrence C. Rubin. This is a collection of case studies that details the use of superheroes, villains and sidekicks in different therapeutic contexts. Barratt-Peacock's clear exploration of how the volume promotes the use of superhero figures, narratives and universes in professional mental health services draws attention to the social, cultural and political ubiquity of superheroes, aptly shining their light on their power as evocative vehicles for expression and communication in our own contemporary contexts.

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