Superhero graphic novels from DC and Marvel: Symbols and avatars, not images and people

Adam Haig
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With the spate of superhero films from DC Comics and Marvel Comics in recent years, it is not surprising that the major companies have been aggressively marketing their original source material in graphic novel (long-form illustrated fiction) format, several titles of which are now making bestseller lists at online bookstores.

Why there should be interest in superheroes is a complex question. Apart from the fact that the corporations actively encourage a market, popularity of the genre apparently stems from frustration with the way social life is, from feelings of insecurity and powerlessness and from the desire to see problems in the world boldly (if simplistically) confronted.

Since art makes direct contact with emotions and feelings, it can accommodate the superhero—often a fancifully costumed individual (with super abilities gained by accident, birth, magic, mutation, science or training) who has some kind of tragedy or personal dilemma and is driven to struggle against malevolent forces.

As a genre, this is basically what is called "science fantasy"; however, the superhero story is also pulp fiction.[1] The publishers invest in formula and stereotype to avoid risk; they capitalize on ephemeral popular moods and status quo ideas; and they valorize allegorical heroes, eternal adventure, moral dualism and suspension of natural laws.

While superhero fiction may have an excited following, it is necessary to step back and consider things in perspective. Artistic taste is not entirely rational, but what are superhero stories saying when they are evaluated in aesthetic states other than excitement? Art, after all, is not simply about feelings, but about making sense of the world through imagination.

Superman

J. Michael Straczynski, *Superman: Earth One*, Vol. 1, New York: DC Comics, 2010, 136 pages

Superman: Earth One attempts a broody reinterpretation of the "man of steel" who was sent to Earth as an infant from the doomed planet Krypton. The melancholy is depicted in grayish colors, tired faces and in a twenty-year-old Clark Kent. He is unsure of himself, leaves his rural town of Smallville and stays in touch with his widowed, adoptive mother.

Clark arrives in Metropolis and is offered a string of high-paying jobs since he is, well, a super athlete, super genius and super executive. Somehow, everyone is *only* fascinated by this oddity. The clichés turn for the worse with a clownish alien villain who destroyed Krypton, and an alien invasion. "Superman" makes his debut and pompous action and speeches follow.

Unsurprisingly, the alien invaders are defeated; Clark gets a job as a reporter; and he publishes a mock interview with Superman, recalling John Byrne's *Man of Steel* (1986). At the end, a character says, "The world has just been profoundly and irrevocably changed," with the alien battle. Frankly, there is no such gravitas in this shallow and unimaginative story.

This is merely setting up readers to buy the next volume and tries to hoodwink them as to the neutrality of the character. Superman says in his self-interview, "I can never get involved with politics or policy." Of course, the long history of the character in American advertisements, public service announcements and even war propaganda belies the claim.

Batman

Geoff Johns, *Batman: Earth One*, Vol. 1, New York: DC Comics, 2012, 144 pages

Batman: Earth One is a reshuffled origin story in a 1980s style tough-on-crime action thriller with a psycho-killer element, which hardens Batman's allies Commissioner James Gordon (recast as a detective) and Butler Alfred Pennyworth (recast as ex-military) and gets rid of the fatuous villain, the Penguin (recast as a sadistic mayor).

It is a mean and ugly story with corrupt cops, pedophile murder, bloodshed and foul language, such as "Stop the damn car!"; "I just saved your ass!"; "Is this asshole undercover?"; "Prick"; "You stupid bastard!"; "This is your damn fault"; and "You son-of-a-bitch!" But the meanness and ugliness do not give a sense of realism.

What one has here is a two-dimensional pulp-noir fantasy with a crime-ruled Gotham City and a twenty-something vigilante-billionaire Bruce Wayne/Batman, who is driven by "vengeance" after the gun murder of his parents in his childhood. In this version of the story, he was a spoiled child.

Batman, as usual, does his crime busting with "no guns," preferring jaw smashing and bone breaking in hand-to-hand combat. He can be injured and forget his limits (he has no super powers), but never dies. Predictably, he foils the pedophile killer and sadistic mayor. Yet it is the new, tough Alfred, with a shotgun, who saves the day. How cheap.

Wonder Woman

J. Michael Straczynski and Phil Hester, *Wonder Woman: Odyssey*, Vol. 1, New York: DC Comics, 2011, 168 pages; J. Michael Straczynski and Phil Hester, *Wonder Woman: Odyssey*, Vol. 2, New York: DC Comics, 2012, 192 pages

Wonder Woman: Odyssey is a poorly written and clumsily illustrated reboot, styling the titular Amazon goddess as an angry and aggressive eighteen-year-old. Visually, things are dark and bloody with gratuitous fight scenes, the character combating a sadistic torturer, secret agents, skeletons, soldiers, sorceresses, soul-snatching demons and strange creatures.

Despite the Homeric allusion in the title, there are no genuine artistic discoveries or a deep sense of artistic pleasure. Wonder Woman is bent on revenge for trhe genocide of her Amazon community. Along the way, she notices there used to be another Wonder Woman and finally learns she is a reincarnation, whose "eternal self" has lived many lives in many times.

More explicit in this work than in others is the myopia of symbolic allegory: "[C]ertain people are born into this world to be *vessels* of a larger ideal, to personify a virtue or a frailty. Chosen by whatever unnamable forces that rule our lives to become living *avatars* of ideas that, although *born* within us, reach far *beyond*. Love, strength, honesty, kindness … and, yes, anger, fear, hostility" (italics in the original).

Apparently, the writers have been reading Carl Jung's archetypal theory, with this notion of "ideas" that are "born with us." In any case, it is all dead syllogisms and dilemmas packaged as "living avatars." As for the privileging of "certain people" in a world ruled by "unnamable forces," that is ideological advocacy of elitism and mysticism.

Spider-Man

Stan Lee and Gerry Conway, *Spider-Man: Death of the Stacys*, New York: Marvel, 2012, 147 pages; Marv Wolfman, *Spider-Man: Return of the Burglar*, New York: Marvel, 2012, 168 pages

Spider-Man: Death of the Stacys collects seven magazines from 1970 to 1973 about the life and heroics of working class college student/newspaper photographer Peter Parker. They are contrived and simplistic action melodramas. Spider-Man fails to prevent, and blames himself for, the deaths of his girlfriend and her father at the hands of his enemies.

Some social-political themes appear—anarchism, communism, fascism, liberalism, LSD use, lynch mobs, political corruption, protest politics and racism—reflecting the mass upheavals in 1968 to 1975 in the United States and internationally. But a concern for the wider society is quickly eclipsed by Parker's small-minded self-absorption. He is angry, empty, crying.

The solipsism amplifies in *Spider-Man: Return of the Burglar*, with eight consecutive magazines from 1979 to 1980. The tale is about Parker's confrontation with his uncle's killer and is totally apolitical. Throughout, the youth is called *angry, distraught, frantic, grim, lonely, morose, perplexed, sorrowful and troubled*. On top of this is ideological confusion.

One reads: "[I]t's that *mask* that makes Spider-Man an *anonymous* hero … And that anonymity makes him a *symbol!* In these troubled times, we need more symbols of justice" (p. 98; italics in original). Anonymous justice? It is fully anti-democratic—arbitrary individuals hiding their faces and carrying out self-appointed law enforcement.

"And so it is an enraged Spider-Man who stalks the darkened city streets. No hood is safe, not the penny-ante pickpocket, nor the major-league mobster. He hunts them all down and pins them to the wall, his demon eyes flaming red with unabated anger." (p. 19). No, this is not justice, but rage-driven vigilante terrorism.

Avengers

Allen Heinberg, *Avengers: The Children's Crusade*, Marvel, 2012, 248 pages

Avengers: The Children's Crusade is a costume soap opera with a large cast of Marvel superheroes. The focus is on the teenage Young Avengers, and the core protagonist is Wiccan/Billy Kaplan, a gay Jewish mutant sorcerer, who believes he and his look alike, Speed/Tommy Shepherd, are the sons of the missing Scarlet Witch/Wanda Maximoff.

As a soap opera, the story involves a moody search for the mother. This "crusade" is soon convoluted with amnesia and an unlikely wedding; family, personality and team conflicts; a struggle with the adult Avengers and the X-Men; mad power lust; the intervention of a thirtieth-century time traveler, who suddenly appears in the middle of the story; and death.

Simply too much is going on here and in a painful way. One must also put up with plot holes and stereotypes in a superheroic universe conveniently divided into "good guys" and "bad guys." It is a lifeless story with a stale feeling of having been lazily recycled. Even the characters have a recycled look and feel about them.

While there are some references to bigotry, same-sex partnerships and teen angst, it is all superficial and insincere in this overwrought work. As it turns out, the priority is to complicate and extend, however bogusly, events that followed the actions of the Scarlet Witch in Brian Michael Bendis' *House of M* (2006).

After reading these seven DC Comics and Marvel Comics superhero graphic novels, it is undeniable that much is aesthetically wrong in them. Collectively, the works are bundles of symbols and avatars—not artistic images—in ideological and retrograde stories exuding greasy sentimentalism, glorifying aggression and indulging retributive fantasy.

What seems to make this more attractive than it should be is the visual element, which has a quite immediate impact. As one takes in the words, one also beholds combinations of color, line and layout from the skillful to clunky, from the expressive to flat, from the funny to grave that create a quite different kind of experience than written text by itself.

Certainly, there are some competent illustrators working in the superhero genre, but as the present case shows, they are generally embellishers of weak fiction. Moreover, they are hemmed in by fixed or extreme types of stylization, typically repeating and reusing the same elements, patterns and poses, in the manner of the mere craftsman.

Indeed, as with the prose in the stories, the visuals are not particularly alive. Often, the figures are mannequin-like and contortedly athletic: the people do not look like people. Photorealism (which some superhero illustrators have tried) will not resolve the problem since the content of the superhero is, for the most part, sociologically and psychologically false.

Altogether, the superhero graphic novels reviewed display a tendency of giving up on life or turning inward because of the pressures of life. Superhero story writer Grant Morrison sums up the attitude as follows: "We already got the real world. Why do you want fiction to be like the real world?"[2] It is as if one could simply step out of existence. Art cannot be reduced to a free play of fantasy.