# Superman in a Secular Age:
# An Examination of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* Through the Lens of the Superhero Genre

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This work is dedicated to the two great loves of my life. For my wife, whose tireless support and encouragement has helped see this project through to its completion. And for my mom, who did not live to see the end product, but whose spirit of love, passion, and hope can be seen on every page.

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## Abstract

The present work builds upon Charles Taylor's invitation in response to Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, to continue to test and refine his hypotheses set out in *A Secular Age*. Taylor makes claims that he is describing the 'conditions of lived experience' within the modern North Atlantic world, yet his sources largely end with the 1960s, which makes claims to relevance in describing the modern conditions of Western society suspect. By using a contemporary genre and medium, the superhero genre in comic book form, we will examine Taylor's arguments along two main concerns: Taylor's presentation of disenchantment/re-enchantment, and his conception of the role of the sublime in modern culture. Both of these aspects touch upon important themes in the North Atlantic contexts, and many of Taylor's insights are bolstered by a reading of the evolving dynamics of the superhero genre. However, there are also crucial weaknesses in Taylor's work when examined in the light of popular culture, the chief being Taylor's insistence on the existence of a robust buffered self within modernity. This is premised on a reading of the development of the Western self that takes disenchantment not only as normative, but as completely overcoming prior forms of enchantment. Such a view is not borne out in the material examined, which still bears traces of a lingering original enchantment not easily done away. Additionally, Taylor's rejection of modern forms of the sublime, especially the monstrous sublime, ignores the ways in which the buffered self is not an already established fact, but a fragile construction in constant need of repair.



## Resumé

Le présent ouvrage s'appuie sur la réponse de Charles Taylor à Stanley Hauerwas et à Romand Coles, où Taylor nous invite à vérifier et à affiner les hypothèses énoncées dans son oeuvre *A Secular Age*. Taylor prétend décrire les « conditions d'une expérience vécue » dans le monde moderne de l'Atlantique Nord, mais il se limite pour la plupart à des sources qui datent, au plus récent, aux années soixante, ce qui rend douteuse la pertinence de son projet aux circonstances de la société moderne occidentale. Par le biais d'un médium et une mode d'expression contemporain, à savoir le genre super-héros tel que représenté dans les bandes dessinées, j'examinerai les propos de Taylor autour de deux préoccupations principales: d'abord, sa présentation de ce qu'il appelle le « désenchantement/ré-enchantement », et par la suite, sa notion de la place du sublime dans la culture moderne. Ces deux aspects abordent des thèmes importants dans le contexte de la culture de l'Atlantique Nord; en plus, de nombreuses prises-de-conscience de Taylor se trouvent à être soutenues par un analyse de la dynamique évolutive du genre super-héros. Cependant, il y a aussi des faiblesses fondamentales dans le travail de Taylor qui se révèlent lorsqu'on l'examine à la lumière de la culture populaire; la plus fondamentale de ces faiblesses étant l'insistance de Taylor qu'il existe un « buffered self » à l'intérieur de la modernité. Ceci est fondé sur une façon de voir l'évolution du soi occidental, qui prend pour acquis non seulement que le désenchantement soit normatif, mais aussi qu'il prime sur toute expression antérieure de l'enchantement. En fait, ce point de vue n'est pas validé par les documents dont je fait l'étude, qui portent encore, en revanche, les traces d'un enchantement

original et dur à supprimer. En outre, le rejet par Taylor des expressions modernes du sublime, surtout du « sublime monstrueux », ne tient pas compte du fait que le « buffered self » n'est pas un fait déjà établi, mais il est une fabrication fragile, ayant constamment besoin de réparation.

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# Introduction

In 2010, in response to a critique by Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles of his major publication, *A Secular Age*, Templeton award-winning scholar Charles Taylor stated, "This book is in a sense a first draft, of some basic theses which could eventually be tested and refined (but not by me, and I hope not refined out of any recognizable shape.)"[1] This dissertation is one particular response to that request. *A Secular Age* brings together and develops Taylor's evolving project on the sources of the modern self and society. In an earlier influential study, *Sources of the Self*, Taylor attempted to "articulate and write a history of the modern identity" and the sources that gave rise to its construction.[2] For Taylor, in this earlier work, the sources of the self that have given rise to modern conceptions of identity are primarily moral sources, created and affirmed through qualitative commitments to certain values. Taylor developed his approach to the construction of the modern self, focusing more closely on religion, in two subsequent works: *A Catholic Modernity* and *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*.

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor continues the project started in *Sources of the Self* by attempting to describe the conditions of our lived experience in the modern Western world, particularly, how we moved "… from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."[3] The basis of approach for *A Secular Age* is philosophical anthropology, touching upon history, art, philosophy, political theory, and linguistics to construct its argument. The study should be approached, as Taylor describes it, not as a "continuous story-and-argument, but rather as a set of interlocking essays, which shed light on each other, and offer a context of relevance for each

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[1] Charles Taylor, "Challenging Issues about the Secular Age," *Modern Theology*, 26: 3 (July 2010), 411.
[2] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), ix.
[3] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

other."[4] It is in this context, namely the complex play of perspectives that informs his analysis, that we should understand Taylor's comment to Hauerwas and Coles. Taylor is here asking and seeking for an engagement from a variety of viewpoints and fields to test, adjust, and revise his hypotheses about the modern age.[5] This dissertation, at its heart, is an attempt to follow-up on that request, testing certain elements of Taylor's hypotheses in light of a particular expression of popular culture and religion: the superhero genre in comic books.

Choosing to examine Taylor's *A Secular Age* through the lens of popular culture might seem an odd choice, but it is well warranted given the attention to the use of popular culture in *A Secular Age*.[6] In particular, when Taylor turns to an analysis of the "age of authenticity," references to popular culture begin to abound: Madonna's *Material Girl*,[7] shopping malls, brand logos, slogans, *Playboy,* and New Age festivals – all are employed by Taylor in presenting an overview of the modern age of authenticity.[8] *Nike* marketing becomes a site for exploring dimensions of expressive individuality, with connections to both alienation and the authenticity of the modern self.[9] Taylor delves into descriptions of dieting cultures prevalent in the 1990s and early 2000s.[10] A central concern in the modern psyche is even referred to by Taylor as the "Peggy Lee axis," named after the popular Jazz singer.[11] According to Taylor, Lee's 1969 song

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[4] Ibid., vix.
[5] Taylor, "Challenging Issues about the Secular Age," 411
[6] The term "popular culture" is used only provisionally here, in order to demarcate a difference between modern forms of culture aimed at wider audiences, and the perception of an elite culture of certain forms of literature, art, and theatre. Taylor's own sources are primarily the latter, and so 'popular' is used as a way to define those sources traditionally seen as aimed to the popular masses. "Popular culture" itself has become an increasingly loaded term carrying with it both assumptions of mass-produced culture, as well as a dichotomy with an "elite culture." Such distinctions between "elite" and "popular" have been significantly challenged more recently by many scholars (E.g.: Bob Scribner, "Is a history of popular culture possible?" *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1989), 175-191; Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular' (1981)," in *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy ( Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 72-80.), as has the idea of a "mass culture" (E.g.: Steven H. Metzger and Miriam J. Chaffee, "The End of Mass Communication?," *Mass Communication & Society*, Vol 4, No. 4 (2001), 365-379.) However, Taylor's own understanding of culture would seem to assume such a dichotomy between "elite" and "popular," and so it is useful in connection with this study to keep the term. The use of the term, though, should be read within the context of strategies of inclusion and exclusion outlined by scholars in the field (E.g: Perry Meisel, *The Myth of Popular Culture from Dante to Dylan* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010)).
[7] Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 561.
[8] Ibid., 489.
[9] Ibid., 483.
[10] Ibid., 502 and 504 respectively.
[11] Ibid., 311 and 501. Lee speaks of being disenchanted as a child between what people told her about life and the reality that she experiences. The chorus speaks to her sense of disenchantment; "Is that all there is, is that all there is / If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing / Let's break out the booze and have a ball / If that's all there is."

"Is that all there is?" represents a central malaise of modern immanence – the threat of a flattening out of life and the heroic. CNN, *A Clockwork Orange*, Elvis Presley, Amnesty International, Che Guevara shirts, and the death of Princess Diana, to name a few, all of these are used by Taylor to uncover key aspirations and dilemmas in modern culture. In *A Secular Age,* it seems clear that Taylor is aware of the need to address popular culture if his claim to be engaging modern culture is to be taken seriously.

Arguably, in any exploration of the nature of the self in modern society, and especially the "conditions of lived experience,"[12] the role and influence of popular culture is critically significant. This is not to say that popular culture exhausts the sources of the construction of the modern self, but there is a serious risk in ignoring its role in shaping those constructions.[13] If there has been a lack of concern by students of Taylor's work regarding the place of popular culture, it is not because popular culture is absent from *A Secular Age*. Rather, it is largely due to the fact that Taylor's traditional interlocutors have been political theorists and social philosophers – a group not typically associated with robust engagement with popular culture in their own work. Conversely, within the field of popular culture and religion, Taylor is virtually unknown, despite his work on the constructions of the modern self – an important concern within popular culture studies. Even prior to a more sociological turn within the field of popular culture and religion in the last decade, Anthony Giddens' work on the self and authenticity has been far more influential in the development of the field than the work of Taylor.

Part of the reason for this disconnect may lie in Taylor's first major work on modern culture, *Sources of the Self* (1989). In *Sources of the Self* there is little significant engagement with features of popular culture. It is as if the cultural sources of the modern self dried up with the work of T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, and Ezra Pound.[14] In *Sources of the Self,* the most recent

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[12] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 4.

[13] The connection between popular culture and constructions of the modern self is the basis of many studies looking at how various social groups are displayed in the media, and the effect upon their conceptions of self such as self-esteem and self-image. How advertisements and other forms of popular culture affect women is one example, but it has also been applied to many other categories such as race and nationality. See, for example, Frances Bonner, *Imagining Women: Cultural Representations and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press in association with the Open University, 1992); Joanne Finkelstein, *The Art of Self Invention: Image and Identity in Popular Visual Culture* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007); Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2002).

[14] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 493.

event mentioned of cultural significance for the modern self is the 1968 Parisian student riots.[15] The approach that informed *Sources of the Self* led one scholar of popular culture, Mette Hjort, to conclude that Taylor's work betrays a "highly pejorative view of popular culture."[16] In her analysis of *Sources of the Self*, one of the few attempts to directly engage Taylor from the perspective of the field of media and popular culture, Hjort noted several troubling features. Of special concern for Hjort was Taylor's apparent reliance on Romantic notions of aesthetic autonomy. According to Hjort, Taylor's analysis converges around 5 general theses: "(1) the maker of a properly aesthetic artefact is a special being, a genius whose gift is natural, rather than social; (2) works of art are non-mimetic, that is they have no referential dimension; (3) art is untouched by means-end calculations; (4) art is an end in itself; (5) the world of art is autonomous and governed exclusively by a set of specifically aesthetic norms and conventions."[17] Such a view of cultural objects, in Hjort's critique, necessarily results in a privileging of authors and artists working within a Romantic framework. As such, "Practices that fall short of the relevant standards allegedly require no discussion since they fail to qualify as aesthetic in the specified sense."[18] While this focus might impute a conscious decision on Taylor's part to exclude important sources of modernity that fall outside of this frame, an exclusion which appears unwarranted, it helps in understanding possible assumptions in Taylor's own selective reading of modern culture.

Such a view of Romantic aesthetic autonomy, articulated by Hjort, threatens to discount the complex web of interaction in which a creator creates a particular cultural object, as well as how it is received and used by the audience.[19] It neglects a pragmatics of action – of how a particular work is read, negotiated, and used – for a pure and aesthetic moment which is difficult

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[15] Ibid., 497 and 501.
[16] Mette Hjort, "Literature: Romantic Expression or Strategic Interaction?" in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, ed. James Tully and Daniel M. Weinstock (Cambridge, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 122.
[17] Ibid., 129.
[18] Ibid., 129.
[19] For an example of the complexity, even mentioning 'creator creates' can be problematic as it assumes a non-mimetic quality as being an integral part of a cultural object. In a world of Youtube, viral videos, and parody there is often a deliberate imitation and borrowing that is used in creating new objects for public consumption. In this context, the term 'prosumer' (first coined by Alvin Toffler in 1980) is useful in that it acknowledges the blending between those who consume culture and then produce or respond in highly professional and media savvy ways. E.g.: Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Morrow, 1980); Don Tapscott, *Grown up Digital: How the Net Generation Is Changing Your World* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009)

to imagine as possible in reality.[20] By ignoring the complex web of relations implicated in the production and exchange of any cultural object, Taylor's *Sources of the Self* sidelines much of the work of cultural studies and the analysis of popular culture of the last 50 years. For example, popular magazines aimed at the working class of the first half of the 20th century are not accorded an aesthetic value precisely because they are aimed and marketed to a particular group with particular aims. But this glossing over of such material is precisely what Richard Hoggart challenged in his work, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), often cited as one of the seminal works of cultural studies. In this work, Hoggart notes the importance of pulp fictions, newspapers, and certain magazines in the construction and maintenance of working class identity in Great Britain. While generally critical of the disruptive impact of these media on close-knit working class communities, Hoggart's work challenges the perception of a rarefied aesthetic as the only aesthetic worthy of study. As Hjort comments: "To put it a little more polemically, Taylor finds fault with, and ultimately discounts, a class specific taste culture that involves little or no appreciation of works of high art," with obvious negative implications towards consumers and "products of contemporary mass culture."[21]

As Pierre Bourdieu and others have noted, notions of aesthetic autonomy and 'taste' are themselves underpinned by strategic and pragmatic concerns that challenge the possibility of a truly 'aesthetic autonomy'.[22] Hjort shares this perspective and claims that Taylor weakens his own position in *Sources of the Self*: "By universalizing the standards of a particular taste culture, Taylor denies much of modern culture the value and status of art, just as he effectively negates the self-understanding of many agents who would be artists."[23] By ignoring forms of popular art, Taylor is in danger of limiting the scope of *Sources of the Self* to a very particular class and taste bound self, rather than providing a richer account of the sources of "emerging modern identity."[24]

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[20] Mette Hjort's further work in *The Strategy of Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) is one such example; "My aim in this book, then, is to begin to develop a pragmatics of literature that grasps the ways in which agents motivated by self-interest interact with other agents in literary contexts" (6).
[21] Hjort, "Literature: Romantic Expression or Strategic Interaction?," 130.
[22] Ibid.,131.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, x.

Taylor could have potentially replied to Hjort by citing the quote above from *Sources of the Self* in its full context; "The whole study is, as I indicated, a prelude to our being able to come to grips with the phenomena of modernity in a more fruitful and less one-sided way than is usual. I didn't have space in this already too big book to paint a full-scale alternative picture of these phenomena."[25] In the preface to *Sources*, Taylor mentions that he is not drawing out all the alternate pictures of modernity that have emerged, but rather seeks to "come to grips with the phenomena of modernity in a more fruitful and less one-sided way than is usual."[26] In *Sources of the Self* Taylor is aware that he is not addressing all elements that contribute to the modern self, but expanding the conversation. However, rather than approaching Hjort's critique in this way, appreciative of her efforts to expand his own meta-narrative, Taylor largely short-circuits engagement with the field of cultural studies when he replies to Hjort's critique; "In short, I can't find my way into the disputes defined here."[27]

In Taylor's response to Hjort, he seems unable to fully grasp the concept that aesthetic taste is not neutral, but implicated in a complex web of societal interactions which include time and class.[28] In response to Hjort's argument that cultural objects are part of means-end strategic and pragmatic calculations, Taylor seems uncomprehending; "The thesis would be a normative statement: art ought to be untouched by such calculations – though of course it often is."[29] Taylor then goes on in the same page to note that he could not imagine anyone disagreeing with such a statement, but Hjort's point is precisely that such a view is not necessary normative, and is itself a decision and a particular way of viewing art and the artist borne of Romantic sensibilities. For cultural and popular studies, all art and cultural objects are involved in such calculations because the artist/creator is not alone as the sole autonomous agent in the artistic act. The producer, the message, the media, audience, production, resistance, and society are all factors in the creation of the cultural object.

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., x.
[27] Charles Taylor, "Reply and re-articulation," in James Tully (ed.), *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, p. 241. In some senses Taylor's response is doubly surprising given his own connection with several of the leading figures in the development of cultural studies. See Marc Caldwell, "Charles Taylor and the Pre-History of British Cultural Studies," *Critical Arts*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2009), 342-373
[28] Charles Taylor, "Reply and re-articulation," 241-244.
[29] Ibid., 241.

To say art ought to be untouched by these is to miss Hjort's point. It is also to come dangerously close to confirming Hjort's assessment of an *a priori* privileging of certain artistic endeavours as art and rejecting others as not art simply because of one's own taste. Taylor's response and tone do not appear malicious in form – he is not rejecting popular culture as such – just uncomprehending of the implications for his project. Instead of noting the provisionality of his arguments in *Sources of the Self*, and welcoming Hjort's critique as opening up new possibilities, Taylor's somewhat dismissive comment about the baffling nature of the field becomes an obstacle for those trying to reconcile his thought with the wider field of media and popular culture. Considering Taylor's stance, why engage a project that seems to define the subject in ways relatively irrelevant to one's own concerns?[30] Considering the expansion of the field of popular culture in the 1990s, and its ongoing struggle for legitimacy within wider academic disciplines at that time, it might have been easier for students of the subject to simply ignore Taylor's methodologically problematic work.

Yet, by ignoring Taylor we risk ignoring a major thinker on modernity and the self, as well as overlooking the ways Taylor has attempted to overcome his previous methodological weaknesses in regards to popular culture. In *A Secular Age* Taylor seems to have legitimately attempted to deal with some of the issues and criticisms raised by Hjort's essay. Apart from his use of popular culture as part of his analysis of the modern, secular age, arguably still in need of methodological sophistication,[31] Taylor appears to have taken into account some of the problems with his prior emphasis on Romantic aesthetic autonomy. In response to Colin Jager's question regarding Taylor's Romantic leanings, Taylor acknowledges his Romantic bias is based on ideology rather than aesthetic concerns – that particularly Romantic notions of human harmony resonate deep within him and articulate his own experience of the world - which implicates him in the strategic use of such material.[32] Likewise, his treatment of the ephiphanic nature of modern concerts and raves suggests an awareness that such events have a role fusing common

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[30] Taylor's dismissive response to Hjort's concerns, which any serious scholar would encounter if looking for material on Taylor and popular culture, may have contributed to the lack of interest in his work by theorists in this field.

[31] This is very much in evidence in his treatment of *Nike,* for example. Chapter 2 discusses some of these methodological issues in Taylor's work in more detail.

[32] Charles Taylor, "Afterward: Apologia pro Libro Suo," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. by Michael Warner, Jonathan van Antwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 320.

action and feeling with the festive and aesthetic, contra to certain Romantic notions of art that sought a 'pure' form separated from embodied action.[33] As part of the expressivism prevalent in our present age of authenticity, certain forms of popular culture contribute to the subtler language that helps us understand our modern predicament. In such a way, popular culture functions in similar ways to the Romantics who also sought a subtler language to grapple and express the cross-pressures and tension within their own society.[34] While Taylor's use of elements of popular culture may be limited in terms of a serious engagement with the field, it seems that he is at least willing to engage the subject.

Conversely, as a major thinker on issues of modernity, Taylor has developed a number of key concepts that can be beneficial for discussions within the field of media and popular culture. For example, Taylor's historical awareness of the sources of the modern self can be used as a corrective to Giddens' work on postmodern reflexivity, which largely ignores the historical development of the self. This, in turn, may help correct a certain bias towards the present in popular culture studies that some scholars have identified as a concern.[35] Additionally, Taylor's treatment of agency has considerable potential in helping understand areas of intersection between the cultural sign and action. In a society where elements of popular culture have led people to don costumes and defend the streets in ways vaguely reminiscent of those found in superhero comics, notions of agency are increasingly important to develop and integrate into various models of popular culture and society.[36] However, a detailed analysis of Taylor's concept of agency and strong evaluation, and their possible contribution to methodological frameworks for the analysis of popular culture, is beyond the scope of this present study. There is a rich area of intersection between political theory, popular culture, and agency still waiting to be explored.

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[33] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 517-518.
[34] Ibid., 755-761.
[35] E.g.: David Morgan, "Studying Religion and Popular Culture: Prospects, Presuppositions, Procedures," in *Between Sacred and Profane Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. by Gordon Lynch (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 29.
[36] The 2011 news stories regarding the Seattle-based Phoenix Jones is one such example, but only represents the most (in)famous real-life superhero. The "Real-life Superhero Project" (http://www.reallifesuperheroes.com/) presents various other individual who, in real life, have adopted superhero-type personas in order to address real world issues.

This study will instead focus on two key concepts developed by Taylor as part of our current culture – one key component (disenchantment), and two key moral sources (the sublime and humanity's dark genesis) of the modern self. We will examine these two components of Taylor's *A Secular Age*, exploring Taylor's development and construction of them through a genre in popular culture with significant connections to religion and spirituality – the superhero genre. By applying Taylor's hypotheses to this important genre, we will be able to better assess their usefulness and development in understanding the modern, post-1960 self – a context Taylor leaves largely underdeveloped. Taylor's work on disenchantment and the development of the modern self can also be usefully integrated into the growing interest in issues of re-enchantment within Western culture. Taylor's appreciation for the historical context he brings to questions of the self is also useful for those concerned with questions of audience, and combating a bias towards the present in the study of popular culture.

Of course, Taylor's own approach is not without criticism, especially along certain historical lines. In tracing a certain narrative of secularity starting from around 1500, Taylor is less interested in medieval or classical sources. As an examination of Taylor's *A Secular Age*, however, this dissertation is focused on his narrative construction of the development of the frame of our 'conditions of lived experience.' As a result, this dissertation assumes some familiarity with the basic corpus of Taylor's academic work. One key example might be Taylor's use of the term "moral sources". The term is based upon Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, developed and used throughout subsequent articles and replies to critics. With this phrase, wrapped up in questions of self and agency, Taylor is attempting to articulate the underlying sources of our moral evaluation of a situation. At base, it refers to the constitutive goods that serve as the underlying source that orients one's very conception of what constitutes the 'good' life. As Taylor writes regarding moral sources and the good; "It can be some action, or motive, or style of life, which is seen as qualitatively superior. 'Good' is used here in a highly general sense, designating anything considered valuable, worthy, admirable, of whatever kind or category."[37] Taylor notes further that this conception of moral sources even includes those views

[37] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 92.

that question traditional morality itself, such as Foucault's work in the Neo-Nietzschean tradition.[38]

What is key is that the self makes decisions based upon the perception of the worth of constitutive goods that provide the moral source for action: one should act in a certain way based upon a perception of a certain constitutive good; one *ought* to consider a particular action as right. In *A Secular Age* Taylor never defines 'moral source,' despite using the term regularly, taking it as a given that it will be read in light of his larger body of work. As we are primarily examining Taylor we will also follow his lead, working with the framework of *A Secular Age* in order to examine it in more detail, illuminating potential weaknesses from within. In speaking of the sublime, for instance, our task is not to provide a new model of the sublime by which to judge Taylor, but to uncover possible weaknesses in his argument for future correction. We are testing Taylor's hypotheses in the light of superhero comics.

An in-depth analysis of Taylor's arguments in the light of a particular genre found in modern society offers a somewhat novel approach. While insights from Taylor's discussion of disenchantment have been utilized in a study of horror films and re-enchantment,[39] there has been little in regards to a sustained discussion of Taylor and popular culture. Indeed, in the major academic blog set up in the wake of the publication of *A Secular Age* as a forum for the discussion of Taylor's work, there has only been one posting that touches directly upon popular culture and Charles Taylor.[40] Given that one of his purposes is to challenge the traditional secularization thesis, the focus on secularity and its connection to public discourse is understandable. Additionally, given Taylor's academic background and the community of scholars that he tends to engage in his effort to "lay out a basis of conversation,"[41] a certain focus on the field of political theory is inevitable. However, Taylor is also making fundamental claims regarding the self in modern culture. This combination of self and modern culture opens up and

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[38] Ibid., 99-103.
[39] Scott Preston. "Horror and Reenchantment: A Supernatural Genre in a Secular Age." Order No. NR64932, York University (Canada), 2010. Accessed May 14, 2014. http://search.proquest.com/docview/748275274?accountid=12339.
[40] Charles Gelman, "Is there anybody out there (Pink Floyd and Charles Taylor)," June 24, 2011. http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/06/24/is-there-anybody-out-there-pink-floyd-and-charles-taylor/. This is a redirect to the original article in German by Hartmut Rosa ("Ist da draußen jemand?," *Frankfurter Rundschau* (June 18, 2011), http://www.fr-online.de/kultur/zeitdiagnose-ist-da-draussen-jemand-,1472786,8569942.html.
[41] Taylor, Afterwards: Apologia Pro Libro Suo," 321.

connects well with the concerns of those studying evolving forms of expressive and popular culture in our current age.

The field of popular culture itself – spanning music, film, television, the internet, producing and crossing genres, etc. – is far too vast to analyze comprehensively. The particular focus for this study will be on the superhero genre, and more specifically the superhero genre through the medium of comic books and graphic novels. This choice seems particularly advantageous considering the popularity of the genre, as well as the still emerging nature of the field. In 2013 alone, 3 of the top 10 grossing motion pictures came from the superhero genre,[42] with 3 of the top 10 all-time grossing movies based on superhero characters in comic books. This popularity has translated down to the small screen as well. While animated shows have often used superhero characters as a staple, the success of *Heroes* and *Smallville* has spawned numerous other live-action series hoping to capitalize on the popularity of the genre, including: *Arrow*, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, *Alphas*, *No Ordinary Family*, and *4400*, to name a few.

In terms of scholarship, the last decade has seen an explosion in academic interest in graphic narrative, with several journals rising to prominence and even some universities setting up Comic Studies programs.[43] The theoretical explorations of the genre, as well as its connection to ideology, have been particularly fruitful fields of analysis. Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics*, Douglas Wolk's *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean,* Martin Barker's *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics*, and many others, all seek to explore the medium of comic books and graphic novels in complex and sophisticated ways, emphasizing its unique character as a medium.

While the treatment of the superhero genre, accounting for around 70% of the comics market share in 2013,[44] has not received the same interest as alternative comics by academic

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[42] *Iron Man 3* was the top-grossing movie in 2013, with *Man of Steel* and *Thor: The Dark World* also in the 10 ten highest-grossing films of the year. *Marvel's The Avengers*, *Iron Man 3*, and *The Dark Knight Rises* all are in the 10 ten highest-grossing films of all time.

[43] Notable here is the University of Florida, University of Oregon, and the University of Toronto at Mississauga. In terms of Journals, *ImageText* is widely regarded as one of the best journals for Comic Studies, though its scope is considerably broader, looking at the general interaction between image and text. This includes not only comics and graphic narrative, but also the internet with its combination of image and text on any given webpage.

[44] This is according to Diamond Comic Distributors, Inc. and their analysis of retail and unit market shares (http://www.diamondcomics.com/Home/1/1/3/237?articleID=143837). For a variety of reasons, during the 1990s

scholars, serious superhero scholarship is growing. The first book-length academic study of superheroes was Richard Reynolds' *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (1994), where he attempted to define the superhero genre, as well as develop certain crucial motifs of the genre such as the importance of costume, seriality, and the status quo. Reynolds defines the superhero genre in relation to seven key elements, taken from the first superhero, Superman: 1) the superhero lacking parents; 2) the superhero assuming life among mere humans; 3) the superhero seeking justice (above law); 4) the superhero contrasting with the normal world; 5) the superhero assuming a normal alter-ego; 6) the superhero and the maintenance of the status quo; 7) the superhero narratives including magic and science-as-magic to create myths.[45] For Reynolds the superhero genre is defined by these core characteristics. However, there is a significant danger of essentializing this particular expression and restricting the genre to one model of the superhero – Superman.

Peter Coogan's understanding of the basis of the superhero genre still revolves around the super*hero* but allows for greater variety, seeing the genre defined by the superhero's relationship to "mission, powers, and identity" as its core.[46] The first element revolves around issues of heroic identity; "prosocial and selfless … his fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society."[47] But this conception of mission also allows for development whereby notions of heroism are less clear cut. For example, for the monstrous superhero, more prevalent in the last few decades, the core mission has become corrupted, and the superhero now acts as the destroyer rather than the preserver of society.[48] The other two features, powers and identity, provide the particular visual and narrative cues that make superhero fiction a genre distinct from pulp and detective fictions, from which the superhero sprung. These visual and narrative cues include the use of special powers that originally took them out of the realm of the

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Diamond became virtually the sole distributors of comics to comic books shops, retail outlets, and speciality stores, so their analysis of market share has long been the industry standard.

[45] Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 12-16.

[46] Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006), 30. Coogan also bases his definition on Superman, but rather than basing his definition on Superman as providing the definitive superhero narrative, his definition is based on the legal definition that Judge Learned Hand used in his ruling that Wonder Man was a copy of Superman in 1939.

[47] Ibid., 31.

[48] Shahriar Fouladi, "*Smallville*: Super-puberty and the Monstrous Superhero," in *The 21st Century Superhero: Essays on Gender, Genre, and Globalization in film*, ed. by Richard J. Gray and Betty Kaklamanidou (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011) 161.

pulp fictions popular during the 1930s,[49] but also the use of alter-egos, and costuming conventions unique to the genre. As Coogan writes:

> The similarities between specific instances of a genre are semantic, abstract, and thematic, and come from the constellation of conventions that are typically present in a genre offering. If a character basically fits the mission-powers-identity definition, even with significant qualifications, and cannot be easily placed into another genre because of the preponderance of superhero-genre conventions, the character is a superhero.[50]

We will be following Coogan's definition of the superhero genre for the purposes of this dissertation.

The study of the superhero genre has been both hampered and advanced as a result of its popularity. Edited volumes seeking to capitalize on this popularity are rife, bringing together academics, creators, and others interested in the field, but also resulting in works of uneven quality that can contribute to a perception of dilettantism in the subject matter.[51] Furthermore, written often for general audiences, the material in these edited volumes can tend toward the descriptive and explanatory, rather than advancing more theoretically insightful discussions. This is understandable as particular methodologies to account for the unique contribution of comics to such fields as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics are still being actively developed and discussed.[52] In the process of development, as in the philosophy of comics whereby what is being studied is "the investigation of the philosophical questions raised by comics themselves,"[53] comics studies will move beyond their role as largely anecdotal sources of examples for other academic discussions.

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[49] Coogan, *Superheroes: The Secret Origins of a Genre*, 31-32.
[50] Ibid., 40.
[51] E.g.: B. J. Oropeza, *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Pop Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005); Tom Morris and Matt Morris, *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socractic Way* (Chicago: Carus Publishing Company, 2005); and most of the *Batman/Spiderman/Avenger and Philosophy* series. While there are excellent essays in these works, they are more uneven, and also include less academic treatments of the subject.
[52] Perhaps one of the most notable recent and evolving developments in the study of graphic narrative is Neil Cohn's *The Visual Language of Comic Books: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014). In this study, taken from years of study, much of it also found on his website (http://www.visuallanguagelab.com/), Cohn tries to present a much more detailed analysis of the process by which the human brain understands and recognizes sequential images.
[53]Aaron Meskin, "What Is the Philosophy of Comics?," Comics Forum, March 26, 2012, http://comicsforum.org /2012/03/26/what-is-the-philosophy-of-comics-by-aaron-meskin/.

The field of religion and comics, especially religion and superheroes, is still in its infancy and struggling methodologically with its own issues. Since Reynolds, reliance on the archetype has been a major focus for works on religion and superheroes, often drawing upon the work of Jung and Campbell, though not always aware of their limitations. There are specific heroic and mythic archetypes, in this rendering, which are connected throughout history but which make it difficult to account for current cultural variations or the specificities of current cultural and social histories, sidelining these areas for an insistence on archetype.[54] Marco Arnaudo's recent *The Myth of the Superhero* (2010, trans. 2013) rectifies some of these problems by developing a more developmental and cultural approach to understanding the idea of myth in comics. For Arnaudo, while there are cultural myths evidenced in the genre narratives, the superheroes themselves might be more usefully understood through shamanistic images rather than traditional heroic ones.[55]

The study of superheroes and religion has typically been approached through theology, with an underlying polemical argument in many works. The Christian perspective is writ large in such popular books as Greg Garrett's *Holy Superheroes: Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Films* and Steven Skelton's *The Gospel According to the World's Greatest Superhero*, but theology is also present in non-Christian works as well. Chris Knowles's *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes*, traces in broad outline some of the connections between the superhero genre, and paranormal and occult research of the last century, with a clear bent towards the Gnostic. Jeffrey Kripal's *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superheroes, and the Paranormal* builds upon Knowles work by developing a long and complex argument that superheroes are the product of occult and spiritualistic sources, rather than Christian, above all emphasizing a human potential ethic unifying the genre at its core. Ultimately, in a sense, there is little difference between Garrett's Christian theological perspective and Kripal's more theosophical slant: both Garrett and Kripal are arguing that their theological perspective is the right one, making a polemical argument rather than a cultural

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[54] This way of approaching the material has a long history, influenced by structuralism and one of the first academic treatments of the subject in Umberto Eco's, "The Myth of Superman," Trans. by Natalie Chilton, *Diacritics*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1972), 14-22.

[55] Marco Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, trans. by Richards Jamie (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 18-27.

one.[56] Recent works by Ben Saunders (*The Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes*) and Anthony Mills (*American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema: The Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of a Genre*), as well as Lewis and Kraemer's edited volume, *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, all are beginning to change the field by moving away from a reliance on archetypal analysis and theological polemics, though there are still a number of methodological issues that remain underdeveloped.

In regards to the methodological approach taken towards superhero comics used in this dissertation, it is primary historical. The comics used in this study are the *Superman* and *X-men* line of comics, encompassing several different comics series, [57] as well as the *Astro City* and *Promethea* series of comics. The time period taken for these series is from 1975 until 2012. Starting in 1975 allows for a comparison to be drawn between the *X-men* and *Superman* lines of comics, as *X-men* restarted as a regular series in 1975. The years 2011 and 2012 marked significant departure points for *Superman* and *X-men* comics respectively, and so function as end dates, allowing also for complete runs of *Astro City* and *Promethea* to fit within these dates. Each comic line was read sequentially in the order that was published, allowing one to track the historical developments, trends, and aberrations along the way. In particular, anything relating to Taylorian conceptions of disenchantment or the sublime – in image, word or narrative – were marked and noted, allowing for developments and tensions to be identified.

After having given the broad outline of this study and a brief overview of recent scholarship, we can turn our attention to the focus of the dissertation itself. The first chapter of this study will provide a close examination of Taylor's *A Secular Age*. In this work, Taylor attempts to examine and provide a basis for our current 'conditions of lived experience' by providing a frame that accounts for how we function within the world. This is not a prescriptive account, but a framing one. For example, according to Taylor, we operate within an immanent

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[56] William Elison, in his review of Kripal's work (*The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 93, No. 1 (January 2012), 127-129) might be on the right track when he suggests the importance of Kripal's book lies less in comics and superheroes, than that of possession and the subject.

[57] *Uncanny X-men* (vol. 1) 94-544, 1-20; *X-men* (vol. 1) 1-275; *New X-men* (vol. 1) 1-156; *Astonishing X-men* (vol. 3) 1-47; *X-treme X-men* (vol. 1) 1-46; *Action Comics* (vol. 1) 403-904; *Superman* (vol. 1) 283-714; *Superman* (vol. 2) 1-226; *Superman: Man of Steel* (vol. 1) 1-134; not including various (though admittedly not all) alternative storylines and separate limited series

frame that does not reject theories of transcendence, but does not require them to make sense of the world either. One of the reasons for this is that we experience the human person as a certain kind of person, as an individual mind, buffered from the outside world. This was not always the case. In the past, the self was more vulnerable and porous to the world of spirits, but there were developments in our frames of experience that began to close our access to that world. All of this operates in *A Secular Age* out of the more general question of secularity, or the change "… which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others"[58]

In answering this question Taylor traces certain developments that are key for understanding the modern 'conditions of lived experience'. For our purposes we will focus on two of these developments. For Taylor, one of the first steps in the creation of the modern experience was the process of disenchantment in the early modern era that gave rise to the notion of the buffered, individual self, whose defining component was the mind. With disenchantment there was a fundamental shift in meaning. Whereby in the enchanted world of magic meaning was found everywhere – in people, but also places and objects – it was replaced through the process of disenchantment by a conception of the individual person which emphasized the role of the mind as alone in producing meaning. In the wake of the move towards a disenchanted view of the nature of reality, new moral sources were needed that provided the source of new meanings, strong evaluations and social imaginaries for the self. The first of these sources is the movement away from an ordered cosmos and towards an infinite universe. One of the key concepts arising from this shift to an infinite universe is the rise of the notion of the sublime. If the change from an ordered cosmos of established meaning to an infinite universe of self-generated meaning unhitched our established sense of place, the root of the second moral source unhooks humanity from a set meaning found within time. With evolutionary forces impacting both our concepts of the world and the human being, the question becomes what kind of being is the human. We think and have reason, but our origin is within the animal kingdom. Taylor develops this idea through the term, "humanity's dark genesis". The first chapter explores the development of each of these concepts in *A Secular Age* and how they provide a rich and

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[58] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

complex theoretical frame for analysis of the particular genre of popular culture under consideration.

The second chapter turns from Taylor to explore the source material that will be used for this study: the superhero genre within the wider field of popular culture. Discussing briefly how some major modern thinkers engage with the question of secularity and how political theory on secularization might benefit from an engagement with the field of popular culture and religion, we will provide some reasons as to the source of the failure to engage with this field. One key reason is the Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture which continues to influence much of academia with its criticism and concern regarding the aims of the cultural industries and propaganda. However, while some of the concerns of the Frankfurt School remain valid, the study of popular culture has increasingly shifted away from a study of production as the sole site of importance when discussing popular culture.

The influence of the Birmingham School of Culture and its descendants on questions of resistance, as well as the sociological and historical turn to lived religion, has shifted attention to questions of audience. Likewise, developments in media theory have raised serious questions regarding the usefulness of separating religion and media in discussions of religion and culture. What is needed instead is an integrated model like the one offered by Stewart Hoover and Jesús Martín-Barbero that does not pit religion and media against one another, but sees all communication as mediated. Combined with Gordon Lynch's development of the sociology of the sacred, a clear, methodologically sound understanding of religion and popular culture should be seen as a crucial aspect of any discussion of the self in the modern age.

In chapter three we will focus more particularly on the superhero genre and its usefulness for studies of culture. While the superhero genre is often connected to the idea of myth, it is best understood not as an idea of myth as static, but part of the dynamic interaction and evolution of culture. The academic discussion of superheroes has long used ideas of myth as a crucial element for understanding the genre, though not always critically aware of the pitfalls of over-reliance upon a particular approach to myth. We will examine some of the ways myth and superheroes have been joined, and note some issues that might be better resolved by expanding the field of play beyond a mythic understanding of superheroes.

Starting with Richard Reynolds, a static conception of myth has often been employed in understanding the superhero genre. Superman as Hercules or Samson, Batman as Odysseus,

Campbell's heroic journey as the journey of the superhero – all function to limit exploration of the superhero genre into static classical archetypes. Instead, we will suggest that myth be understood more in line with Richard Slotkin's work on the American frontier. In his influential trilogy of books, Slotkin posits the myth of the hero not as static but constantly evolving and responding to the needs of culture. This allows, for instance, for an examination that moves beyond Superman as static concept, to a Superman that is in flux, responding to the particular needs of culture. This also more adequately reflects the reality that Superman, like other superheroes, is now a very different character than he was 50 years ago. While there might be similarities between the various historical expressions of the genre, they must be established within the source material rather than simply assumed.

The second section of the dissertation will involve the analysis of the categories identified in Taylor's *A Secular Age* – their weaknesses and strengths – through examining their influence and expression within a particular segment of culture: the superhero genre in comic books and graphic novels. The first category that will be examined is Taylor's idea of disenchantment. This is a critically important element in Taylor's work. Taylor perceives the process of disenchantment to be the basis of major changes within modern society. It has also been the source of some of the greatest criticism of *A Secular Age*. The criticisms largely revolve around Taylor's historical account of disenchantment, rather than on Taylor's use of the idea in understanding the modern self. In this chapter we will not pursue the historical line of criticism, but work with Taylor's response to such criticism by emphasizing disenchantment as an idea. Taylor uses the term disenchantment in *A Secular Age* as the standard translation of Weber's *Entzauberung*. However, in the context of Taylor's concerns, disenchantment might be better understood as "de-magic-ment," *zauber* being German for magic. What Taylor is trying to articulate by using Weber's *Entzauberung*-as-disenchantment is a certain change in our perception of causation, from a vertical field of hierarchical, moral causation, to a horizontal, scientific one. This, in turn, provides a basis for the rise of the buffered self in that meaning becomes horizontal and self-generated, rather than provided by an awareness of our place of the Great Chain of Being. However, it is not entirely clear if society is as disenchanted as Taylor would claim, the superhero genre showing evidence of disenchantment and re-enchantment, but also traces of an enchantment still connected to a pre-disenchanted age.

Next, we will turn our attention to Taylor's identification of the sublime as an important modern moral source. For Taylor, the sublime functions as that which "breaks through this self-absorption [of the self] and awakens our sense of what is really important."[59] The idea of the sublime has historically been intimately connected with nature. Until the early 1800s, this made sense, but with urbanization and industrialization the source of the sublime seems to expand and shift, a reality given sharp focus in the superhero genre. With the rise of the notion of the priority of the individual, sources of the sublime can also begin to be found in other humans. However, in order to function in analogous ways to the sublime, this adjusted source gives rise to a different form: the human monstrous, or the monstrous sublime. In important ways, the category of the sublime is underdeveloped in *A Secular Age*, despite its continuing influence in American society and academic discourse. As a result, there is the need to re-construct the category of the sublime in connection with the superhero genre in the modern context, which also sheds light on the technological and industrial dimensions of the sublime of modern culture especially in the American context. These reconstructions of the sublime also point to a key tension within Taylor's work: that we may not be as buffered as selves as Taylor's analysis would suggest.

In the conclusion, we will attempt to offer a general assessment of the dissertation, finding some important conceptual difficulties arising from Taylor's conception of the buffered self. It would appear for Taylor that the idea of the buffered self is a crucial feature of the modern experience of the self, resulting from disenchantment. However, while for Taylor this idea is posited in terms that border on the absolute, an examination of the superhero genre would indicate that the buffered self is far more provisional. Indeed, rather than as something that has been achieved, the buffered self is fragile, constantly under threat, and something struggled towards rather than established as a de facto reality of the modern self.

Before starting the study proper, it is also necessary to state some methodological considerations. In order to analyze Taylor's claims in ways consistent with his project, the thesis explores the superhero genre through the type of hermeneutical and historical philosophical anthropology that Taylor employs. That means that our focus will be on questions of meaning-

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[59] Ibid., 339.

making in the human, and the construction and framing of conceptions of self and experience. This study seeks to allow the source material of the superhero genre to speak for itself as much as possible, which will mean the exploration of a plurality of voices within the genre. This is not a problem but a plus, as it will help to track general movements, conflicts and tensions within this expression of popular culture, while not attempting to claim one single voice for all constructions of self. This does, however, lead to several limitations, but also further avenues of study.

First, by concentrating on philosophical anthropology and meaning-making of the self, we will not be able to give as much attention to issues of image and representation as might be necessary to fully address issues internal to the graphic narrative medium. Comic books, and graphic narrative in general, are the site of numerous discussions regarding questions of representation, perception, the interplay of word and image, their impact, and relations to media. All of these topics are currently being pursued in discussions of the nature of graphic narrative across disciplinary lines: communication studies, sociology, literature, art history, media studies, linguistics and neurology all have individuals contributing to these discussions. Rather than trying to accommodate all of this varied material in a work that would be increasingly unwieldy, I note here the necessity for further engagement with these topics, but concede that in general they are beyond the scope of this present dissertation. By and large, I will be approaching the source material in keeping with Charles Hatfield's view of comics as text, attempting as much as possible to 'read' the images, though also acknowledging a key influence of Terrence Wandtke's work suggesting that superhero comics are in fact better placed within the medium of oral culture rather than written.[60]

Also, as a project in philosophical anthropology, this dissertation begs for a companion piece. While Taylor's project of philosophical anthropology seeks to understand broad developments in the evolving conception of the modern subject, it leaves largely unaddressed the question of how such representations are negotiated by actual individuals. Alan Moore in *Promethea* might draw a very interesting and enticing image of reality, which can then be examined and explored for what it says about evolving conceptions of self, but it also directly

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[60] Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 33; Terrence R. Wandtke, *The Meaning of Superhero Comic Books* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012).

challenges the ways in which readers themselves take, understand, and interpret the text into their own lives. The companion piece to our project of philosophical anthropology is a sociological treatment of the same subject. Such a sociological treatment is beyond the scope of the present study, but should be read as always lurking behind its conclusions.

Finally, in choosing to examine the superhero genre in comic books, the content of my study is limited to American culture, especially given the intimate connection between comic books and American culture – along with jazz, the comic book is often considered a uniquely American cultural creation.[61] Insofar as superhero comics offer only a male construction of the self, though, I accept similar limitations as much as the same is applied to Taylor's *A Secular Age* in like measure. If Taylor's sources, which are arguably more male-centric than those of the superhero series used in this study,[62] result in an outcome that is judged to exclude "the female" then my study is subject to the same criticism. Insofar as there might be a reticence to take a critical stance regarding Taylor's sources, the same should apply to *a priori* assumptions regarding the validity of the superhero genre to offer observations and comments regarding the human condition.

The four superhero series chosen were selected both because of their various attempts at articulating elements of the human condition as well as minimizing a male-centric charge. Superman as an iconic representation of the superhero genre is necessary to study for an adequate image of the superhero and culture. The X-men series of comics was chosen because it is routinely praised for its long-standing history of its presentation and complexity of women portrayed, its large female audience, as well as scoring well on the Bechdel scale.[63] *Promethea*, by Alan Moore, features a woman as the main character and is a conscious attempt by Moore to

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[61] It is worthwhile noting that while the wider study of graphic narrative can be used to encompass a wide variety of literature, including comics but also manga, picture books, wood engravings, etc., the term 'comics' generally refers to the particular narrative form with its origins in the United States. Other forms, such as Japanese manga, or European *bande dessinée*, are generally recognized as necessitating a different form of analysis which respects their different cultural and artistic developments.

[62] After all, Taylor's sources are almost exclusively drawn from male thinkers and philosophers, while the Superman series of comics, for one, has had significant female authorship.

[63] The Bechdel test (named after American cartoonist Alison Bechdel) is a rough guide to examining portrayals of women as articulating "something often missing in popular culture: not the number of women we see on screen, but the depth of their stories, and the range of their concerns." (Neda Ulaby, '"The Bechdel Rule," Defining Popular Culture Character,' *All Things Considered* (National Public Radio), September 2, 2008, http://www.npr.org /templates/story/story.php?storyId=94202522). The test looks to see, for example, if in individual comics issues or comics series over a period of time, whether two women talk to each other about something besides a man.

write Wonder Woman as she should have been, as well as being a general challenge to traditional superhero standards of narrative.[64] *Astro City*, by Kurt Busiek, is a self-conscious reconstruction of the superhero genre, in response to the deconstruction and disenchantment of the genre in the 1990s. These comics offer interpretive venues to explore aspects of the contemporary 'conditions of lived experience,' with the caveat that an *a posteriori* assessment of their ability to adequately address issues of the human condition is also needed.

This is not to say that a feminist critique does not have a very valuable place in this type of analysis. It does. In fact, there continues to be a very complex and sophisticated discussion on the place of woman and images of women in the superhero genre.[65] Lillian Robinson's *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes* (2004) looks at the development of women in comics in ways sensitive to the various waves of feminism that have shaped modern culture. One of her most intriguing points is the absence of second wave feminism in the superhero genre. In her view, what can be seen within the genre is a jump to third wave feminism without engaging the gains and context of the second wave of feminist scholars.[66] The changing portrayal of the female superhero across mediums, based in William Marston's iconic Wonder Woman, is traced in Jennifer Stuller's *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors:*

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[64] Comic book artist and writer Trina Robbins even wrote in to gushingly call *Promethea* "what Wonder Woman should be if she hadn't been destroyed by generations of idiots" ("Imaginary Lines," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #3 (October 1999), Letters.).

[65] Arguably, the greatest threat to women and the superhero genre is precisely the assumption of their exclusion within the genre. Two elements point worrisomely in this direction based on the increasing diversification of media. Most scholars now reject the idea of a 'mass culture', instead pointing to an increasing popularity of appealing to smaller, more specialized audiences. Rather than focus efforts on getting 10 people to watch one television channel, why not have 4 channels with the expectation that each will garner 4 people to watch; the market share becomes higher. The impact for the superhero genre, if any, is yet to be felt but there is some concern regarding the two major comic producers. Marvel Comics, the creator of Spiderman, Ironman, the Avengers, and the X-men, was recently acquired by the Disney Corporation. Part of the reason for the acquisition was Disney's desire to corner the young male audience in a similar way to their cornering of the young female audience through Disney princesses. Corollary to this is DC Comics, owned by Time-Warner and the publishers of such superhero comics as Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, in a 2010 study regarding their readership. What caused greater concern than DC noting the low numbers of female readers, was the methodology employed for the study that seemed aimed precisely at under-reporting female readership. Online participation in the study, which showed significant female participation, was rejected as unreliable without any justification. Instead, the readership survey was confined to reporting through comic book shops which have long been identified as a male bastion. If attempting to attract a very particular demographic is a growing trend, then the DC report seems less about encouraging diversity and female readers, than targeting and reinforcing the male nature of the industry, reversing trends of the last decade.

[66] Lillian S. Robinson, *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

*Superwomen in Modern Mythology*.[67] Some of the most interesting voices are online: The Mary Sue, Laura Sneddon's Comicbookgrrrl, and Laura Hudson across several websites, are among the best.[68] But this also raises the question of where to locate the female voice? Do we locate the female voice in those that emphasize the feminine as non-violent, nurturing, maternal, and within traditional models of femininity? Do we locate that voice in those who reject an essentializing femininity for an embrace of the occasional beefcake image and punch-em-up as legitimate objects of female desire? Or do we refuse to locate an authoritative voice at all for a plurality of views that propels the conversation perpetually forward. I have opted for the last choice, not just in regards to the question of woman and comics, but as a general principle animating this entire study. The result, as should be with attempts at all philosophical anthropology, is a study that grapples with major cultural developments, but remains provisional in its conclusions. Such studies are constantly provisional precisely because the Other, found in a myriad of others, is always entitled to the last word.

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[67] Jennifer K. Stuller, *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

[68] The Mary Sue advertises itself as "A guide to girl geek culture" and has a wide variety of writers as well of areas of interest beyond comics books; http://www.themarysue.com/. Comicbookgrrrl is written by Laura Sneddon, focusing on comic books; http://www.comicbookgrrrl.com/. Laura Hudson, while not having her own site, consistently writes some of the most interesting and thought-provoking pieces concerning women and the superhero genre; see, for example, "The Big Sexy Problem with Superheroines and Their 'Liberated' Sexuality," *Comics Alliance*, September 22, 2011, http://comicsalliance.com/starfire-catwoman-sex-superheroine/.

# Chapter 1 –
# Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*

At more than 800 pages – and over 2 lbs - Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* is an intimidating book even before opening the cover.[1] If size alone is not enough to deter one, the sheer historical breadth and philosophical scope of the work, drawing on over 50 years of academic experience by one of the most prominent political philosophers in the post-WW2 era, might tempt one to return it to the bookshelf. Opening an array of critical concerns for such diverse areas as political theory, literary analysis, and linguistics, the book invites serious and sustained engagement. Stories abound of colleagues admitting confusion, irritation, and sometimes anger over trying to come to grips with Taylor's monograph, with its many side interests and threads. This is unfortunate for at its core *A Secular Age* revolves around a fairly simple and straightforward thesis. Taylor states that he wants to examine society as secular in a way that defines and teases the historical and cultural shift "… which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."[2]

One of Taylor's main interests in *A Secular* Age, is to construct a "continuing polemic"[3] against subtraction accounts of the relation between the secular and religion. Subtraction accounts of secularization utilize narratives that emphasize the inevitable retreat of religion from public spaces (secularity 1), and the decline of religion in the face of the progress of the modern, rational, secular society (secularity 2). These narratives are invoked by some as a way of describing the actual condition of modern life when they are merely theories, ways of organizing information, that account for our experience within the modern Western (i.e. North Atlantic) world. As a result, subtraction stories are used to silence religious views in the public sphere as

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[1] Jon Butler, "Disquieted History in *A Secular Age*" in *Varieties of Secularism in A Secular Age*, ed. by Michael Warner, Jonathan Van Antwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 194.
[2] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3. Taylor refers to this way of looking at the secular in society as 'secularity 3'.
[3] Ibid., 22.

hopelessly parochial and irrelevant, but they are also used to limit the range of belief and unbelief into simple dichotomies. One either believes or does not believe, but that limits the question of the content of that belief, whether it be in a traditional conception of a transcendent deity, the possibility of human potential, or an immanent transcendence that calls the self into new ways of being without relying upon a transcendent entity for the transformation of self and society. Taylor is not alone in identifying that there is, in his words, an exploding nova of options of both modern belief but also unbelief.[4]

To counter subtraction views of secularization that shrink our experience, Taylor does not attempt to present a particular political or social theory about the relationship between the secular and religion, but rather a thick account of the "conditions of lived experience".[5] Indeed, he appears to be at pains to make this clear, returning to this concern in a variety of ways.[6] What Taylor wants to do is re-create a narrative that can account not only for belief and unbelief, but also for the sheer varieties of both by excavating the shared sources from which they derive meaning and value. His narrative, so much as it is trying to capture the 'conditions of lived experience' in the modern, North Atlantic context, seeks to illuminate the meta-frames through which we experience our evolving relation to immanence and transcendence within self and society. Or rather, we do not notice anything at all, because this frame serves as the ground and starting point of our very experience with others.[7]

Taylor calls this framework the Immanent Frame, consisting of a fundamentally new cosmic and social imaginary compared to pre-modern contexts. We live in a naturally-ordered, immanent universe that may, but need not, refer to God in order to understand it. This stands in

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[4] A significant segment of the study of popular culture and religion of the last 20 years has consistently sought to challenge assumptions about religious retreat. Much of this has been through a shift to the examination of material culture, as well as through audience-reception studies. Some prime examples include Lynn Schofield Clark's *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), Wade Clark Roof's *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), and David Morgan's *The Lure of Images: A History of Religion and Visual Media in America* (New York: Routledge, 2007). David Chidester has also written an influential essay questioning categories used to distinguish between what is 'authentic' religion and what is 'fake.' He challenges the underlying assumptions about those categories regarding modern religion in both "The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'n' Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Winter 1996), 743-765; and, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[5] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 4.

[6] Cf. Ibid., 5, 8, 12, 13-14, 30, 173, 549, 557.

[7] Ibid., 549.

sharp contrast to a transcendentally-oriented cosmos that has no meaning without a belief in God. We operate as buffered individuals both aware of our interactions with the world, but also capable of detached awareness of those choices, giving rise to modern individualism. As modern individuals we rely on instrumental reason in justifying our actions. These constitute some of the basic contours of the Immanent Frame, according to Taylor, out of which we experience and operate within the world.[8] He is not arguing for the *reality* of these conditions, but rather that they offer an account of how we feel and assume to operate within the world.

In the process of constructing the Immanent Frame, Taylor identifies three basic orientations that have arisen in our modern context. These orientations provide basic ways of understanding the world, our place within it, as well as moral sources that fuel our actions. These orientations Taylor identifies as: exclusive humanism, transcendental theism, and the Immanent Counter-Enlightenment. Broadly speaking, for Taylor, the exclusive humanist position rejects any attempt to locate a good beyond this immanent universe. It affirms the centrality of the buffered self and stresses the use of instrumental reason in adjudicating moral decisions. Transcendental theism experiences the Immanent Frame not as naturally leading to immanence, but as open to transcendence to enrich and give final meaning. The Immanent Counter-Enlightenment, fuelled by the contributions of such theorists as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bataille, and Foucault, stands firmly within the non-theistic world view of exclusive humanism, but rejects Enlightenment reason and progress as a desiccating reason, neglecting or ignoring our wild, violent genesis as animals, and leading to a levelling of all life.

In the interaction of these major cultural orientations any two can gang up on the other on important issues.[9] Humanists and those of the Immanent Counter-Enlightenment join together against a transcendent good beyond this life. Transcendental theists and 'anti-humanists' can gang up against exclusive humanism, claiming that its vision of life is lacking and stale. At the same time, transcendental theism and exclusive humanism both defend the idea of a common human good against the more deconstructionist stance of Nietzschean 'anti-humanists'. In describing these orientations as unifying against the third on key issues, however, is Taylor trying to explore strategies for debate in the public sphere, or describing facets of our 'conditions

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[8] Ibid., 566.
[9] Ibid., 636-639.

of lived experience'? While the two are not mutually exclusive, where one places the emphasis – the ground for public debate or with 'conditions of lived experience' – shifts and changes the nature of discussion. However, Taylor's basic contention as found within *A Secular Age* is that he is exploring the latter, namely the 'conditions of lived experience'.[10]

In this chapter we will be examining two key categories: Taylor's idea of disenchantment, and the connected moral sources of the sublime and humanity's dark genesis. For Taylor the process of disenchantment signals the end, as it were, of the former Western, Christendom worldview. With disenchantment comes the rise of the buffered self, which supports a disengaged view of the world, instrumental rationality, and the Enlightenment. But how does disenchantment emerge and become such an influence? Taylor's concept of disenchantment is understood against the foil of his notion of the enchanted world of the pre-modern era. Taylor identifies three constituent parts of such a world: (1) an understanding of a cosmos which "testified to divine purpose and action"[11], providing a place for everything including natural disasters; (2) the order and make up of society – kingdom, church, guild, etc. – were grounded in God and a conception that human action was part of divine time; and (3) the enchanted world involved not merely the sense of a world inhabited by a range of spirits, but a porous sense of self where meaning did not come only through the self but also from outside.

A key feature of Taylor's view of enchantment is the porousness of the self to outside influences, which made it vulnerable to spirits, powers, and other outside sources of meaning. In the enchanted world, according to Taylor, it was not just that spirits and demons were perceived as acting upon the individual, but that *meaning* was found outside as well, in a host of objects and places. This feeling of being potentially acted upon by things outside the self, of not necessarily having final control over even the internal actions and will of the self, creates a sense

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[10] Admittedly there is a tension here. In *A Secular Age* Taylor repeatedly mentions that what he is trying to do is describe the 'conditions of lived experience'. However, in his response to critics he often acknowledges a more particular goal of fostering a certain kind of dialogue; "If the book has a perlocutionary effect, it is rather this: I think what we badly need is a conversation between a host of different positions, religious, nonreligious, antireligious, humanist, antihumanist, and so on, in which we eschew mutual caricature and try to understand what 'fullness' means for the other. What makes me impatient are the positions that are put forward as conversation-stoppers: I have a three-line argument which shows that your position is absurd or impossible or totally immoral ("Afterward: Apologia pro Libro Suo," 318). While certainly interrelated, this goal and the stated purpose of *A Secular Age* can also be approached separately.

[11] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 36.

of vulnerability which Taylor identifies as being one of the principle features that disenchantment served to displace.[12]

It can be difficult, in our age, to grasp what Taylor means so an example might be helpful. There is a stone – round, polished and smooth – with a hole in the middle. It is there on the ground long before we come across it. It is an object of fertility, clearly; further evidence being the lush surroundings I find it in by the river. I should pick it up, for its power to produce fertility might be useful. I must leave it where it is, because what if I disturb it when it was not meant to be disturbed; its power will follow me wherever I go and lead to all sorts of malevolent acts. I need a source of power greater than that found in the stone. I must go to the church where the Host is full of good power that can drive away the influence of the rock. But that is not all. That rock, as a fertility symbol, might also prompt love in another or myself. As Taylor writes; "That is, emotions, which are in the very depths of human life exist in a space which takes us beyond ourselves, which is porous to some outside power, a person-like power."[13] As a fertility sign, the rock exudes love, making me love; the boundary between the created emotion of the rock and my own emotion cannot be found.

In the enchanted world meaning is not contextual; to say the rock has meaning for you but not me, makes no sense. The meaning of the rock, its power, is outside you or me. Further, to say "the rock has meaning for you but not me" is to take oneself out of the community, risking disaster for everyone because we are all porous and interconnected. This is not an interconnectedness in the ecological sense, but in the sense that there are no boundaries distinctly separating you and me from sources of malevolent power. If, to use Taylor's example, you do not show up with the other villagers to beat the boundaries of the parish to drive away evil, you risk inviting evil into the entire parish.[14] In such a world, the only hope is for a more powerful "white" magic that can be used and employed to prevent such bad things: the "magic" of God. This is a world seemingly very foreign to us, easy to caricature, because of our rootedness in a world thoroughly disenchanted. It must be noted that does not mean that we cannot *re-enchant*

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[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 42.

portions of the world, populating it with new meaning. But the re-enchantment can only ever be a *re*-enchantment, as disenchantment has already won out.[15] But how did that happen?

According to Taylor's narrative, disenchantment has a long history in Western Christendom in various movements of religious reform, Protestant as well as others. These Reform movements were a reaction against the perception of a hierarchical two-tiered nature of the Catholic Church with the clergy ruling and being served by the laity.[16] There was a tension, in part, in the perceived notion that a lay person, no matter how pious, could never rise to the piety of the renunciative vocations.[17] There was a glass-ceiling, as it were, that valued renunciation and asceticism over those things affirming ordinary life, but that also gave the Church access to God and the power of the sacraments that lay people never could fully possess themselves. This conception of the power of the priest raised questions about the nature of God too, a God that appeared tamed by the Church rather than an all-powerful Creator. In the social dimension, people who were far from pious could wield the power of 'white' magic as a form of social coercion.[18] To combat this was not easy, for it meant a leap out of the causal forces of white and dark magic entirely, and into the realm of the unknown, and to do it alone. The coming of the Reformation sped up the process of moving out of such a world-view, as well as providing a community in which to take shelter. This break was not only a doing away with magic, but also required a reconception of our relations in communities. A shift in cosmic, social, and moral imaginaries was in the making.

The implications for this move to disenchantment, according to Taylor, were profound. Doing away with enchantment meant the possibility of a freeing from belief in any spirit, and eventually anything transcendent at all. Disenchantment required new ways of understanding and ordering society, but this, in turn, let loose old and new tensions that had been held in check by the old equilibrium. This gave rise to a new conception of both time as well as space.[19] It also gave rise to the "buffered self": 'As a bounded self I can see the boundary as a buffer, such

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[15] Cf. *Ibid*., 316, "Afterward: Apologia pro Libro Suo," 307, "Reply to Schweiker et al," *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 90, No. 3 (July 2010), 405; "Charles Taylor's Response to a Roundtable Discussion of his book *A Secular Age*," *Political Theology*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (March 2010), 299-300.
[16] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 61-63.
[17] Ibid., 76.
[18] Ibid., 73.
[19] Ibid., 29.

that things beyond don't need to "get to me," to use the contemporary expression.'[20] In an enchanted world, the self was always vulnerable to outside influences because of its porous nature. Being porous, at the mercy of outside influence, it sought support from powers it hoped would be stronger than the malevolent forces that inhabited the world. The creation of the buffered self, though, gave a feeling of invulnerability.[21] By disengaging from a world of spirits and other forces, I could distance myself from it, viewing it from outside. From such a distance, the self could choose which influences were accepted as being influences and which were not. The critical factor was the agent's response, a response which generated meaning, rather than it being imposed from without. This does not mean that I cannot be manipulated, but that I can generate a counter-manipulation: if I feel a compulsion to do something, the power is within me to reject the source of that compulsion.

The flip side of such invulnerability is the dilemma that in being invulnerable to spirits, forces and gods, I will also be invulnerable to letting in anything significant at all.[22] Life can become dull and flat. In light of this ambivalence, and an Enlightenment that raises the disengaged self to a moral value, there is a reaction: we've lost something, something important. Within Western culture there is an alternate response to Enlightenment disenchantment, which sees the entire Enlightenment project as a levelling down of human experience. There is a rawness, violent and amoral, that is always threatening; it is a force found throughout nature, and throughout the human as well. Joseph Conrad, T. H. Lawrence, and Herman Melville are all authors who reinvigorate the human with this kind of re-enchantment, bringing out the dark places of our nature.

In the end, though, this is a re-enchantment, a reaction to an already disenchanted world. For Taylor, the enchanted world is dead and gone; '… there have been frequent attempts to "reenchant" the world, or at least admonitions and invitations to do so. … But it is clear that the poetry of Wordsworth, Novalis, or that of Rilke, cannot come close to the original experience of porous selves.'[23] Of course none of this precludes the possibility that Taylor has been looking in the wrong places.

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[20] Ibid., 38-39.
[21] Ibid., 300-301.
[22] Ibid., 302.
[23] Taylor, "Afterward: Apologia pro Libro Suo," 304.

In the modern age, then, we are left with disenchantment and re-enchantment: forms of disenchantment which leave us as buffered selves fighting the malaise of meaning, or re-enchantments that react against desiccating reason, but are themselves only ever a reaction. This reality, this frame of experience, is one element contributing to the deep tensions within the modern self. The self is faced with an abundance of meaning, but also aware it is a meaning of its own making, and so provisional. Taylor identifies the three main axes or malaises as, "(1) the sense of the fragility of meaning, the search for an over-arching significance; (2) the felt flatness of our attempts to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives [due to the disconnection with cosmic time]; and (3) the utter flatness, emptiness of the ordinary."[24] But, to borrow Peggy Lee's phrase, "Is this all there is" to the idea of disenchantment?[25]

Taylor's narrative, especially concerning the relation between popular and elite cultures, suggests that there might be more. Taylor argues that for most of Western Christendom, up until about 1500, there was no difference between elite culture and the popular culture of the masses.[26] This began to change with the coming of Reform movements, and ended with a break within societal structure between elites and the lower classes. Before, society had been understood to form one organic whole, now for both Catholic and Reform perspectives this was increasingly not the case: where there once was a shared popular culture, there now developed a separation between the elite and the masses. While elites could participate in popular culture, the emergence of a 'high' culture resisted entry from below.[27] Taylor begins to identify dichotomies forming within society: between a superstitious, magical view of the world and a rational, disenchanted one; between the Carnival of subverted social order, to unlimited codes of moral behaviour; from earthy, incarnated forms of culture, to abstract, excarnated, 'pure' expressions of art and music.[28]

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[24] Ibid., 309.
[25] Taylor, *A Secular* Age, 311.
[26] Ibid., 87.
[27] Ibid., 87. Taylor draws upon Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1978) to make his argument here. It is surprising that Taylor does not seem to address Burke's own bridging of the gap between the elites and the masses, in the elites' re-'discovery' of popular culture that emerged almost hand-in-hand with the initial separation (281-286). There also seems to be an assumption of a porousness by elites to enter into mass culture seemingly without resistance, which is a questionable assumption. See especially, Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in the French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).
[28] E.g.: Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25-54, 352-361.

These dichotomies are crucial to Taylor's argument for it is in reaction to Enlightenment scientific rationalism that new sources of self-understanding and self-meaning evolved. According to Taylor, the evolving modern experience was characterized by a growing separation between thought and form, with the priority given to thought. As people reacted to conceptual innovations, and alternative frameworks were attempted, there was a need for artists to find the language to express these new frames of reference. For instance, as Enlightenment rationality grew, giving value to moral disengagement, abstract, pure forms of music, disembedded from a context of human action, grew in response. But it was the ideas, formulated by the philosophical elite, that came first; "Perhaps one of the reasons why some readers see my accounts as giving priority to 'ideas' is that the modern social imaginary I talk about *did* as a matter of fact originate in theory."[29] This conception of elite culture trickling down to become the culture of everyone is a core theme in *A Secular Age*.[30]

Some of the problematic features of such a view of the interaction between elite and popular culture, built upon contested assumptions of the power of elites to enforce their views on others, as well as the seeming disregard Taylor gives to sites of resistance within popular and mass culture, will be discussed at greater length in chapter 2. Putting aside for the moment the contentiousness of his claims regarding the relationship between elite and popular culture from 1500 until the 20th century, Taylor's own narrative points towards a need for closer examination of the post-1960 time period. Something different, something that goes beyond Taylor's previous narrative, seems to be happening. I will use one very pertinent example here out of many possibilities. According to Taylor's narrative, the revolution of the 1960s was precipitated primarily by Romantic thought, and can be seen as the outcome of its influence on culture.[31] What then do we make of Rock & Roll, which became the anthem of revolution? Encapsulated within Rock & Roll was a fierce valuing of expressive individualism. However, it would be questionable to trace the source of that form of music solely to the Romantic Movement.[32]

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[29] Taylor, "Afterward: Apologia pro Libro Suo," 314. This seems a rather extreme statement to make, especially as those ideas were *mediated* and transmitted through material items, thus seeming to implicate the physical in the creation of the social imaginary as much as the 'idea'.
[30] Cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 87 and 476.
[31] Ibid., 476.
[32] E.g.: Perry Meisel, *The Cowboy and the Dandy: Crossing over from Romanticism to Rock and Roll*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. 9-35. Meisel notes that while there is much by way of sensibilities and

Rock & Roll sprang up out of diverse musical influences with one of the biggest influences being Jazz.[33] Jazz, at its source, plays with infinite variety and spontaneity within an ordered structure. As most Jazz aficionados will say, the best Jazz is improvised Jazz: the various musicians express their own creativity, their own outlook, on the form of the music as the music unfolds. But Jazz itself traces its origins to the simple Spirituals sung by black slaves.[34] We have with the black spiritual, often sung while working at manual labour, a popular, folk, incarnated form of expression created by and for those who were not elites. It is difficult to see how the Spiritual itself could be said to rely on an elite mental framework for its impetus. Yet it also contained within itself a yearning for freedom, creativity, and a searching for new ways of constructing social bonds against oppression, all of which became hallmarks of the 1960s.

Accordingly, in addition to Romantic thought, we find sources of the expressive revolution within society in popular forms of culture. These influences of popular culture, then, 'trickle-up' to all segments of society. This raises serious questions whether there is a neat separation between the culture of elite and lower classes. However, if that is the case, then it is not entirely clear if the elite rejection of enchantment, giving rise to disenchantment, tells the whole story about culture: Wordsworth and Rilke are not alone in expressing the 'conditions of lived experience' within the Immanent Frame. Folk songs and popular ballads also have their place in shaping culture and the self. So, too, the Gothic authors who pressed against a too rosy view of Romantic conceptions of life, appealing instead to the dark and the supernatural as providing deep sources of meaning regarding the self. While disenchantment does shape modern experience, there is no reason to think that the dichotomies Taylor presented above regarding elite and 'low' culture mean that the forms of disenchantment promoted within elite cultures tell the whole story. Some forms of enchantment might very well have survived in the popular culture of the masses, retaining their lingering influence in the popular culture of today.

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approach that Rock and Roll and Romaniticism shares, his argument stresses that part of the interesting nature of this connection is that they developed largely separate as responses to the conditions of the time.

[33] C.f.: Anthony De Curtis, James Henke, and Holly George-Warren (eds.), *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll: The Definitive History of the Most Important Artists and Their Music* (New York: Random House, 1992); Paul Friedlander, *Rock and Roll: A Social History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).

[34] Eileen Southern, 'A Study in Jazz Historiography: "The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz,"' *College Music Symposium* Vol. 29(1989), 123-133.

If the above contention is true, we should see evidence for not only disenchantment and re-enchantment within popular culture, but the possibility for forms of enchantment as well. Taylor has described the movement toward disenchantment within 'elite' culture, but his own engagement with the sources does not address the 'lower,' popular forms of culture where enchantment may have remained. This enchantment, though, must move beyond mere "frissons" that we create to fascinate ourselves,[35] and into part of the taken-for-grantedness of Taylor's "the way we naively take things to be"[36] if it is to be more than just another form or re-enchantment. The battlegrounds between disenchantment, enchantment and re-enchantment within superhero comics become a key proving ground of Taylor's claims.

The second category we will be exploring is Taylor's construction of two modern moral sources that arise as a result of disenchantment: the conception of the sublime, and what Taylor calls "humanity's dark genesis." In regards to the idea of beauty, the aesthetic, and the sublime, Taylor draws heavily upon Johan Schiller and his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*:

> The imposition of morality by the will on our refractory desires (Schiller plainly has Kant in mind here) divides reason and sensibility, and in effect enslaves one side of our nature to the other. But the simple affirmation of desire against morality divides us no less, and simply reverses the relation of master and slave. What we need to seek is a spontaneous unity, a harmony of all our faculties, and this we find in beauty. In beauty, form and content, will and desire, come of themselves together, indeed they merge inseparably.
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> At first, it seems that Schiller is talking about beauty as an aid to being moral; it enables one more effectively to live up to the moral law, because one goes along willingly, so to speak. But as the work proceeds, it more and more appears that Schiller sees the stage of aesthetic unity as a higher stage, beyond moralism. It is an integral fulfilment, in which all sides of our nature come together harmoniously, in which we achieve full freedom, since one side of us is no longer forced to submit to the demands of the other, and in which we experience the fullness of joy. This is the fulfillment, going beyond morality, which is really the point of our existence
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> This is what Schiller seems to be saying. He introduces his new term 'play', which was to be taken up by so many writers after him in the last two centuries. It designates the activities by which we create and respond to beauty, and it is chosen

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[35] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 741.
[36] Ibid., 30.

> to carry the sense of gratuitous, spontaneous freedom which is lacking in the imposition of law by the will. Schiller asserts that human beings "are only human insofar as they play". This is the apex of human self-realization.[37]

This beauty Taylor describes can be found in works of art that attempt to create a "subtler language" of symbols that prepare and open us to an experience of nature and the cosmos. This opening up to a new appreciation and understanding of our place in the universe, though, can also be experienced in images of wilderness and nature that break us out of complacency into the richer world of the sublime.[38]

Taylor identifies the origin of the modern aesthetic notion of the sublime in the idea of the "deep ruins" of time. This, in turn, is part of the change in our cosmic imaginary, '… just as the social imaginary consists of the understanding which makes sense of our social practices, so the "cosmic imaginary" makes sense of the ways in which the surrounding world figures in our lives.'[39] This change in the cosmic imaginary was one of movement from an ordered cosmos, to an infinite universe; from one where humans occupied a specific place in the order of things, to one of wide open space: "Our sense of the universe now is precisely defined by the vast and the unfathomable: vastness in space, and above all in time; … But what is unprecedented in human history, there is no longer a clear and obvious sense that this vastness is shaped and limited by an antecedent plan."[40] We discover our planet is but one planet in a bigger solar system, then that our solar system is but one solar system among many in our galaxy, our galaxy one of many in our universe. The universe stretches out infinitely, but also infinitely inward through the discovery of cells, molecules, atoms, quarks, etc. This same opening up occurs in time, the last stop being that of evolution, which unhooks the human from any set structures in an ordered cosmos. In the face of infinity and eternity it is easy to retreat into the relative safety of the buffered self. Something is needed to orient us, but also to break us out of complacency. For Taylor, that category is the sublime.

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[37] Ibid., 358.
[38] Ibid., 353-361; according to Taylor, the creation of the 'subtler' language of arts and poetry had its start in the Early Modern context in attempts to translate the experience and sublimity of the wilderness.
[39] Ibid., 323; Taylor continues; "the ways, for instance, that it figures in our religious images and practices, including explicit cosmological doctrines; in the stories we tell about other lands and other ages; in our ways of marking the seasons and the passage of time; in the place of 'nature' in our moral and aesthetic sensibility; and in our attempts to develop a 'scientific' cosmology, if any."
[40] Ibid., 325.

The images Taylor cites in understanding the category of the sublime are evocative, as their authors meant them to be. Burnett speaks of "… those boundless Regions where the Stars inhabit."[41] In reference to the Alps, one traveller relates an experience of; "a delightful Horror, a terrified Joy and at the same time that I was infinitely pleased, I trembled."[42] And from one traveller struck by the American wilderness; "How great are the advantages of solitude!—How sublime is the silence of nature's ever-active energies! There is something in the very nature of wilderness, which charms the ear, and soothes the spirit of man. There is religion in it."[43] The image of the wilderness stood out in new ways for people caught in this new cosmic imaginary of the universe. Returning to Burnett, mountains became for him, "the ruins of a broken world".[44] They are reminders, like the ruins of the Romans and the Greeks, of a past that is connected to us, just as that past is ultimately unrecoverable as a living option. To see the ruins of a Roman amphitheatre is to be reminded of the ebb and flow of civilizations; a reminder of the transience of our own culture, just as they also provide a landmark to orient ourselves within a wider universe of meaning. But the mountains, erupting out of the earth, straining heavenward, are not ruins of a merely human culture, part of ordered gardens of human design, but bespeak a different sort of eruption. It is an eruption into the 'Excess' of the sublime; "We do naturally, upon such occasion, think of God and his greatness; and whatsoever hath but a shadow and appearance of the INFINITE, as all things have that are too big for our comprehension, they fill and overbear the mind with Excess, and cast it into a pleasing kind of stupor and admiration."[45]

Like the eruption of the mountains out of the earth, the experience of 'Excess' provokes eruptions out of the self that are constitutive of the sublime; 'The sight of "Excess", vast, strong, unencompassible , provoking fear, even horror, breaks through this self-absorption and awakens our sense of what is really important.'[46] What is really important might be God, or the primal call of nature, or the smallness of humanity before the vastness of the universe, invoking a sort of fellow feeling that unites one with all other humans. Whatever the direction of the call, it is that which breaks us out of complacency. It is not part of the relational order, but an emotive

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[41] Ibid., 334.
[42] Ibid., 337.
[43] Ibid., 340.
[44] Ibid., 333.
[45] Thomas Burnet, quoted in Ibid., 334.
[46] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 339.

reaction to a source beyond us, engulfing us, in a boundless 'Excess'. We are small before this 'Excess', a mere reed buffeted by outside forces, but along with Pascal, a thinking reed, which makes all the difference.[47] It is little surprise that the 19th century, which saw the rise of the sublime as a moral source, witnessed the rise of Gothic literature. Out of Gothic literature rose a new element of the sublime: the monstrous.

Taylor does not directly address this in *A Secular Age,* but there are shifts in the meaning and sources of the sublime within the Western context. Icons and religious imagery once served to shift the human outside of themselves away from a narrow conception of reality focused on the self and towards the divine. Aquinas's famous vision before the Eucharist pulled him to exclaim that all his human writing "appears to be as so much straw."[48] It would be a mistake, then, to assume this idea of the sublime only arises in the modern era. However, the nature of the sublime and the content of the reaction do appear to be different. The religious sublime, the mystical experience, produced fear and awe. Its purpose was to enrich and draw one back to a deeper awareness upon which the moral order was founded: God. The sublime of the 18th and 19th century, became a moral source unto itself, challenging the buffered self and the all too easy danger of narrow self-absorption, both in connection with the self and humanity's place in the universe. Hence it is no surprise that images of wilderness, untapped, wild, full of energy, and occupying a fixed place within the world would be a key site of the sublime. The wild and untamed in the wilderness became a form of the numinous other for those surrounded by civility. This is where Taylor's account of the sublime largely focuses.

As industrialization grew, however, with the march to the city intensifying, for some the wilderness seemed impossibly far away. Even in rural areas, long accustomed to cultivation, nature could appear tame. The countryside was tamed by the human will, the same will that was also supposed to keep the human carefully checked and controlled. Even the wilderness was tamed into parks and reserves. However, with the urban jungle increasing, sources for the sublime shifted from the wilderness to the metropolis. If the buffered self was tamed and controlled, the way for it to break through complacency was to break through the expectations of what it meant to be human, to break through into the monstrous. While there have always been

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[47] Ibid., 347.
[48] Thomas Aquinas, quoted in Alban Butler, *Lives of the Saints*, Vol. 1, Ed. and Rev. 2nd Ed by Herbert Thurston and Donald Attwater (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, Inc., 1956), 511.

monsters to address human fears and anxieties, the monsters of the buffered self underwent transformation. Greek and Roman myths are full of the tensions of resolving our animal desire with the human: satyrs, centaurs, medusa, to name a few, as well as the danger of nature itself in a variety of mythological beasts. The buffered self, instead, lends itself to a focus on the human monster; what really lurks in the depths of the human heart. In the first stage of this development, as the Enlightenment grew and recognized a solid break with the past, the haunting spectre of previous societal constructions grew. Crumbling castles, superstitions, spectres of the supernatural, and Catholic sensuality become common themes found in the popular works of Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*, E.T.A. Hoffman's *The Devil's Elixir*, and Friedrich Schiller's *The Ghost-Seer*. Given Taylor's use of Schiller, it is interesting that Marvin Jarvis notices the clear emergence of a human sublime in his introduction to the English translation of Schiller's *The Ghost-Seer*, peeking through a story revolving around mystery, secret societies and necromancy.[49]

In 1818, with the publication of *Frankenstein*, there was a shift to a more distinctly human monster, and a more distinctly Enlightenment one. As Monette Vacquin writes concerning Shelly:

> She brought to light the passion, the obsessive desire for control behind the indisputable legitimacy of knowing. She glimpsed the subversion of reason and its silent and invisible transformation into rationalism, that supreme alibi of desire. She foresaw that the monstrous would be to make others the object which would dramatically reveal, in the cold light of the laboratory, the 'truths' of which it was the bearer. She had the premonition that such a devastating passion could only be so violent because it harboured an unformulated desire for knowledge of itself, and above all the illusion of the end of tension inherent in the human adventure.[50]

While Valquin might be identifying her own concerns more than Shelly's prophetic voice, Shelly's work does still mark an important shift. In 1819 *The Vampyre: A Tale* by William Polidori was published, three years after staying with Byron and the two Shelly`s at the Geneva Lake that saw the beginnings of the Frankenstein story. What is significant is that his story

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[49] Marvin Jarvis, "Foreword," in Friedrich Schiller, *The Ghost-Seer* (London: Hesperus Press, 2003).
[50] Monette Vacquin, "The monstrous as the paradigm of modernity? Or Frankenstein, myth of the birth of the contemporary," *Diogenes*, Vol. 49, No. 195 (Fall 2002), 30.

serves to shift the vampire away from its roots in folklore – where vampires could not easily fit back into society – and into Gothic story. The vampire could be anyone, hiding in plain sight, but with a monstrous hunger. Polidori's work becomes the basis for Bram Stoker's own *Dracula* in 1897, and the whole vampire mythos that followed. The "penny dreadfuls," popular throughout the 1800s, were a serialized mixture of gothic tales and stories of famous criminals.[51] This period also saw the rise of Edgar Allen Poe, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. All of these were designed to create "frisson" in the reader, frisson that might stir one out of their own complacency in regards to the deeper nature of what it means to be human.[52]

Despite the prevalence of images of the monstrous, the Other, and new places that characterize the sublime, Taylor focuses in much more depth on what he terms the moral source found in "humanity's dark genesis." The origin for the dark genesis of humanity is found, for Taylor, in the shift in cosmic imaginaries from a cosmos with order and meaning imposed from without, to an infinite, immanent universe. As the sublime was to space, so the dark genesis is to time. As the universe was stretched infinitely outward and inward, time, too, was stretched. From a world precisely measured to have started on October 22, 4004 B.C. at 6 p.m.,[53] geology forced the history of the earth further and further back. But even before this, in Vico's proto-anthropology and Condillac and Herder's debates on the development of language,[54] there is recognition that what was thought of as static – culture and language – had a much deeper history. Darwin's conception of evolution was merely another chapter in an evolving narrative that broke humanity from its defined place in time. With evolution, we are one animal among many. We might be a thinking reed, but we are first just a reed, our ancestry lost in the

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[51] They are also sometime seen as an ancestor of the comic book hero as well. The "penny dreadfuls" were influential in the rise of the pulp fiction that arose in the early 20th century, which was in turn an inspiration for the superhero. See, for example, Robert S. Petersen, *Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels: A History of Graphic Narratives* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 80-83, 133-138.

[52] Taylor uses the idea of 'frisson' in *A Secular Age* to indicate the appearance of enchantment, when what is actually being generated is a certain kind of feeling that produces satisfaction. For Taylor, the feeling of frisson – going to a movie to experience the feeling of terror, for example – is a prime indication that we do not live in an enchanted age anymore (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 29). The concept of 'frisson' is discussed more in chapter 4 of this study, and the ways in which Taylor's analysis might not be adequately describing the condition of 'frisson' in the modern context.

[53] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 324.

[54] Ibid., 335 & 343.

primordial origins of life. One answer to the question of what it means to be human is an awareness of a deep kinship with the Earth and all those we share it with;

> But the sense of kinship was greatly strengthened by what I've been calling our dark genesis, the idea that our humanity emerged out of an animal life which we share with other living things, and this is given ever greater resonance if we see ourselves as evolving out of these other life-forms. That is why this sensibility of kinship has grown if anything even more powerful in our time, even while some of the ideas of design and Providence which Herder, for instance, still drew on have receded. It has become one of the crucial underpinnings of much contemporary ecological consciousness and concern.[55]

We are indeed a reed, born amongst a verdant shore, but we are a *thinking* reed which provides a new sense of place, and anchor, with which to construct new meanings.

As a moral source, the dark genesis of humanity finds its power in answering the question of what it means to be human. What *does* it mean to be human? What are our deep origins? Is the story of humanity one of progress, of rising above the merely biological? Is it a Deistic story, where God sets the order and leaves humans alone to find their way? Why do we need God at all, why not do away with the idea as a last, lingering superstition? Are there ways to fight through to God, to account for my experience, when the story of human development no longer seems to need God to explain its origins? Why do we live in the presumption that there is something special about humans at all, when at heart human origins are in the wild, violent, amoral, irrational nature of animals? The conception of humanity's dark genesis looks inward, within the individual, for deep meaning connecting it with its primordial ancestors, rather than outward to other humans. It provides a strong, modern source of meaning, which is drawn upon by those within the Immanent Frame.

It is interesting in this context, that Taylor appears to locate issues of the nature of violence within humanity's dark genesis, and in particular into the realm of the Immanent Counter-Enlightenment. Taylor devotes considerable space to this category in *A Secular Age*, finding it supported by many key figures in Western thought, and a continuing source of inspiration for many seminal artists and authors of our time. On the one hand, the Immanent

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[55] Ibid., 344-345.

Counter-Enlightenment reacts against exclusive humanism and the wholeness it purports to offer as leading to happiness; "harmony will be unattainable, and it is even a culpable weakness to believe in it, or strive for it. The belief in untroubled happiness is not only a childish illusion, but also involves a truncation of human nature, turning our backs on much of what we are."[56] However, there is also a positive way of describing it, finding within the dark genesis a deep moral source; "The idea is, in various forms, that these [the irrational, amoral, even violent forces within us] cannot simply be condemned and uprooted, because our existence, and/or vitality, creativity, strength, ability to create beauty, depend on them."[57] For the Immanent Counter-Enlightenment, humanity's dark genesis holds great power and even beauty,[58] but it is a beauty in pain and the courage to accept the violence and irrationality of the human animal. This is an intoxicating image for many. Unlike rational moral agency that almost seems to hang disengaged above the human, invoking stultifying splits between mind and body, the power for Immanent Counter-Enlightenment comes from the Primal deep within us. In humanism, it is a disinterested, duty-bound benevolence towards all, that seeks the elimination or minimization of violence and suffering that is heroic.[59] For the Immanent Counter-Enlightenment violence and death are affirmed and even re-constituted as leading to the numinous.

In some important ways the Immanent Counter-Enlightenment stance can be seen as challenging traditional accounts of what it means to be human. Unable to cope with the reality of mortality and suffering, transposing it onto an infinitely postponed judgement and afterlife in the theistic spin, or disengaging with the source of creativity and strength in the humanistic spin, any claim to a real holism of the human is but a fanciful stance;

> So this move remains within the modern affirmation of life in a sense. There is nothing higher than the movement of life itself (the Will to Power). But it chafes at the benevolence, the universalism, the harmony, the order. It wants to rehabilitate destruction and chaos, the infliction of suffering and exploitation, as part of the life to be affirmed. Life properly understood also affirms death and destruction. To pretend otherwise is to try and restrict it, tame it, hem it in,

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[56] Ibid., 635.
[57] Ibid., 369.
[58] Ibid., 664.
[59] Ibid., 702.

> deprive it of its highest manifestations, what makes it something you can say "yes" to.[60]

In meaningless suffering, according to Nietzsche, humanism runs up against something it cannot accept, as there is always an excess that goes beyond what merely instrumental accounts of morality can offer. It leaves the massive reality of dysteleological suffering either denied or ignored. But those victims and their stories remain: "Along with communion, there is division, alienation, spite, mutual forgetfulness, never reconciled and brought together again."[61] If, however, violence, suffering, and death are merely part of existence, then to be whole is to bring those elements back in to what it means to be human. This is part of the claim by the Immanent Counter-Enlightenment of the shallowness and confinement of the typical humanist accounts of human life. Rather than fleeing from that which is inevitable, we should embrace it, and there is nothing more inevitable than death: "there have developed a whole range of views in the post-Enlightenment world, which … have seen in death, at least the moment of death, or the standpoint of death, a privileged position, one at which the meaning, the point of life comes clear, or can be more closely attained than in fullness of life."[62] We are thrown into life, but we can choose how we approach death, but in both we are alone to find the meaning for ourselves within our own resources.

Taylor's use of the numinous here, in regards to violence, is interesting in its internal, buffered form. Rather than being related to the sublime, Taylor connects the numinous to the buffered self and its experience in the encounter with violence and our dark genesis. As noted above, this movement is first rooted in an uncompromising appraisal of the human condition. Humans are animals, part of a nature that is wild, violent, irrational and amoral. Within nature, violence, suffering and death are natural; the reality of which is not something to be pitied as tragic or glossed over. Nor is it something that will ever go away: the reality of death, especially violent death, will always represent a surd that instrumental reason cannot account. It is far better to face our situation of suffering, of living in a cold, silent universe, filled with violence and death, and confront it with honesty and courage. This awakens a different sense of the

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[60] Ibid., 373.
[61] Ibid., 319.
[62] Ibid., 320.

heroic than that produced by humanism. In facing down destruction and violence, we change it, charge it, and take it within ourselves. By embracing the ultimate outcome of those forces we become "dead men on leave". But in taking it in, seeing ourselves already claimed by death, "then we live in the element of violence, but like kings, unafraid, as agents of pure action, dealing death; we are the rulers of death. What was terrifying before is now exciting, exhilarating; we're on a high. It gives sense to our lives. This is what it means to transcend."[63]

It can be easy to dismiss such an image as too extreme to be readily embraced, but there is a deep attraction to it as well. Richard Slotkin, in his seminal book on the American myth, *Regeneration Through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier*, notes the prevalence of this sort of figure in the stories of the American frontier and later in the image of the cowboy hero.[64] A community is under threat of violence and destruction. A man, often an outsider to that community, comes along. In order to save the community, he must embrace the forces of violence within him and become more violent than the violent. But this violence is of a different sort. It is directed, channelled away from the community, from what is good, and towards those elements that need removing. In the end, the community is regenerated through the same violence that threatened to destroy it.[65] It would be difficult to find a member of a Western audience who has not seen a movie, or read a book that does not have variations of this theme as a central premise.

This formula of the Western, though, points to a key component in the link between the role of violence and the idea of violence as a form of the numinous.

> So we see destruction as also divine, as with Kali-Shiva. And when you can bring yourself to identify with it, you are renouncing all the things which get destroyed, purifying yourself. Wild destruction is given a meaning and a purpose. In a sense it is domesticated, becomes less fearful in one way, even as it acquires part of the terror of the numinous.[66]

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[63] Ibid., 647.
[64] Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier* (Oklahoma City: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973); also see Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Oklahoma City: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).
[65] Unlike the image of the hero in the Immanent Counter-Enlightenment, though, the hero is domesticated through his violence. It is as if, purged from his need to be violent, he has been made ready to enter society.
[66] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 647.

As the numinous, destruction beckons us to self-affirmation, as giving force to our lives, while fully aware of the violence and loss that can be inflicted upon us.[67] But even that has meaning. It is not a meaning imposed from outside but rather a meaning we find for ourselves.

If all there is in the universe is wild, irrational nature, with no meaning imposed from without, if even our death has no intrinsic meaning, then the creation of all meaning is entirely up to us. The universe has no exogenous significance, but only the significance which I give. I become a master of meaning, and so a master of life and death, for they no longer have significance without the meaning attached to them from within the construct of human agents. It is the shift out of the traditional view of the instrumental into something else: "This abandonment [of the instrumental effort to make the thing-order endure] takes us out of the domain where everything is instrumental for something else, into a realm of activity which has its end in itself."[68] Violence becomes a way of purification, of removing all that is not fit for the truly human self. Sexuality, because it transgresses the centrality and inevitability of death, becomes a form of birth and creativity. This birth and creativity explodes out in an embrace of sexual excess as affirming not life, but the self as master of meaning. As Taylor notes regarding the marriage of Nietzsche to certain streams of Russian Bolshevism; "So their answer to the power of evil, at least for part of it, the drive to violence, is to internalize it, and baptise it, as it were, consecrate it to the striving for excellence; marrying the Übermensch, the primitive, and the highest."[69]

This sounds like a recipe for the making of a good supervillain. It also, however, lies at the heart of many heroes who must manage an inner, animal nature and channel it to best use. In the superhero genre, seminal characters such as the Hulk, Wolverine, and the Punisher, among others, directly address such issues of the violence inherent within themselves, as well as society as a whole. However, there are tensions here: the violence of the Hulk and Wolverine are rarely shown as one-sided. There is an equal tendency to portray their violent excesses in ways that represent a monstrous explosion of violence that threatens the self, as to present recognition of and valorization of violence as part of the primal, dark genesis of the human self. Both aspects are present, receiving more or less consideration depending upon the storyteller. There is a

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[67] Ibid., 670.
[68] Ibid., 661.
[69] Ibid., 683.

missing element, however, if one focuses merely on the dark genesis of the human self. What is missing is the Other, in its various manifestations, that points one away from the self to a wider reorientation.

The example of the Hulk helps to illuminate this point further. While the Hulk can be seen as an example of both violent excess and violence as part of the primal, dark human self and its integration, that integration is only ever partial. The uneasy status of the integration of the human Dr. Bruce Banner and the monstrously strong Hulk in the same person is a key component in the evolving narrative. The nerdish, methodical, intellectual Bruce Banner is in near constant conflict with the explosive, instinctual, force that is the Hulk. While there is an integrationist element within many storylines, there are nearly equally as many storylines that separate the two, taking one as the main focus and creating the alternate persona as the Other that directly challenges the safe boundaries of the first. Interestingly, especially within the last two decades, the main protagonist has just as often been the Hulk, and not the more 'human' Bruce Banner. The Hulk may point to an evolving conflict within the question of the sources of meaning utilized by the modern self: between a human-focused attention on the integration of our primal self through the idea of our dark, primal genesis, and an other-focused attention that propels us to question the adequacy of those categories.

The tension between these two moral sources alerts us to a tension within Taylor's presentation of the 'conditions of lived experience'.[70] Taylor's focus on humanity's dark genesis as the dominant moral source affecting the modern self relies upon a strong, dominant, even overwhelming role for the buffered self. Without a strong, buffered self, arising out of disenchantment, Taylor's presentation of the modern 'conditions of lived experience,' while not fatally flawed, is seriously weakened. That is the reason why our focus will be on questions of the sublime found within modern culture, especially the superhero genre. In many ways, Taylor's presentation of the priority of the buffered self against porousness, or rather the disappearance of porosity within modern constructions of the self, rests upon the disappearance of the sublime and its manifestations within modern experience. The sublime and its

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[70] Richard Bernstein, "The Uneasy Tensions of Immanence and Transcendence," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* Vol. 21, No. 1 (2008), 11-16, also notes this uneasiness in *A Secular Age*, questioning whether Taylor actually believes that transcendent options inevitably lead to a better human choice than immanent options, or whether the argument that he has developed in *A Secular Age* demands that he follow through on that logic.

manifestations, such as the monstrous, orient us beyond the self to acknowledge a world outside of the self's boundaries. The sublime, the other, and the monstrous, threaten by orienting us outside of the self, but also make us aware of the slips in our own boundaries – that there are pores in our walls that might be letting other powers in whether we like it or not. Images of the modern sublime, then, how they are presented, imaged, but also conflicts between the sublime and the buffered self will become key sites of analysis for this study.

# Chapter 2 –
# Taylor and Popular Culture

This chapter undertakes an examination of Taylor's *A Secular Age* through the lens of popular culture. As Taylor's project attempts to delineate the 'conditions of lived experience' in modernity, some engagement with the field of popular culture seems necessary in order to fully understand the modern experience. Arguably, some serious engagement with the complex impact modern, popular sources of culture have on our ways of seeing and experiencing the world should be a critical part of any grand theory of the interface of religion and secularity. As far back as 1976 John Wiley Nelson concluded that, "Popular culture is to what most Americans believe as worship services are to what the members of institutional religion believe."[1] There is a pervasiveness and ubiquity between media, popular culture, and modernity that both 'knockers' and 'boosters' of these cultural forms can seem to agree. In particular, when making claims regarding the 'conditions of lived experience' in the modern context, there is a need to address cultural developments that have occurred since the 1960s and its sexual and expressive revolutions. Taylor tries to show some awareness of the post-1960s modern cultural context through the use of such images as Madonna, rock concerts, and Nike shoes, but his analysis and use of popular culture leaves much to be desired. Without a meaningful engagement with developments within the field of popular culture, media, and religion, there is the danger that Taylor's conclusions regarding modern moral sources, disenchantment, the immanent frame – his very 'conditions of lived experience' – will appear to float far above the evolving dynamics of lived culture for many.

While Taylor has gone some way in trying to rectify his reliance on an appeal to Romantic aesthetic autonomy found in *Sources of the Self*, lingering traces of his preference for Romantic thinkers and their way of thinking can be felt throughout *A Secular Age*. Indeed, in response to Colin Jager's identification of Romantic influences in his work, Taylor proudly

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[1] John Wiley Nelson, *Your God is Alive and Well and Appearing in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 16.

asserts, "I plead guilty as charged. I'm a hopeless German romantic of the 1790s. I resonate with Herder's idea of humanity as the orchestra, in which all the differences between human beings could ultimately sound together in harmony."[2] While the influence of the Romantics on modern culture is not at issue, this particular approach to art and culture may make the scholar of popular culture suspicious.

As Terry Eagleton has noted, the assumption that art is defined by its uniqueness and novelty is a relatively recent phenomenon, arising only two centuries ago as part of the Romantic Movement.[3] These developments resonated with conceptions of the self that prized uniqueness, novelty, and individual aura. Yet, as cultural historian Johan Huizinga reminds us, medieval ideas of art were very different than Romantic notions; "Art was not yet a means, as it is now, to step out of the routine of everyday life to pass some moments in contemplation; it had to be enjoyed as an element of life itself."[4] Quite the opposite of Romantic aesthetic autonomy, medieval art's main purposes "were [as] essential instruments for communicating ideology and reinforcing belief."[5] If Romantic notions of art prized individuality, contemplation, the idea, and the mind, was constructed out of notions of medieval art that first prized art as serving a particular purpose such as instruction, edification, and other, terrestrial, bodily concerns. In this way, judging art and individual expression under the rubrics of a Romantic, abstract, "pure" concept of art, cultural objects associated with materiality and consumerism were already born with a stain.[6] "What clouds our perception," David Freedberg states, "is exactly the compulsion to establish whether an object is art or not, and whether it belong in a museum or not".[7] If an object of art is chosen to reside in a museum there is often a perception that it is a worthy piece of art, pure, to gaze upon and consider as art. However, if it resides in a museum, it has already been taken out of the community from which it belonged, no longer possible to serve a purpose

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[2] Taylor, "Apologia," 320.
[3] Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 75.
[4] Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought and Art in France and the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), 224.
[5] Gregor Goethals, "The electronic golden calf: transforming ritual and icon," in Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahon (eds.), *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 125.
[6] Taylor develops the movement to 'absolute' art, especially music, in more detail in *A Secular Age* (355-356), whereby music and art become divorced from a reliance upon narrative to express emotions and other messages directly.
[7] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 437.

except as object. This movement further enforces the separation between a 'pure' concept of art, and popular objects of art implicated in serving particular purposes within a community.

Taylor's treatment of material culture in *A Secular Age* is a prime case in point. For Taylor, material culture that does not draw upon Romantic notions of uniqueness and novelty are given short shrift.[8] According to Taylor, the purchase of various mass produced items might be linked to a quest for individual expression but can never ultimately lead to a "real individual autonomy".[9] Calvin Klein, for instance, advertises on their website that they are "sexy, urban, and youthful," offering a "full lifestyle brand."[10] However, if the locus is on the individual rather than expression, the quest for individual expression can never express more autonomy than the number of shirts and other fashion accessories that are mass-produced. My autonomy is the same as the 100,000 others with the same shirt in their closet, so how can it serve as an expression of my individuality? In terms of Romantic notions of novelty and art, this makes sense. In terms of theories of popular culture of expression, resistance, and what individual fashion represents, this line of critique is questionable. Calvin Klein can be part of my quest for individual expression, if as an individual such clothes contribute to expressing who I am or want to be.

It is interesting in this connection that while Taylor notes the communal character of events such as rock concerts and Princess Diana's funeral, the possible communal nature of material culture is ignored. The implication for material culture seems to be: if it is an aesthetically significant commodity, it must separate us, make us unique, or else what is the point in purchasing such an item as a source of individual expression. But this is fundamentally premised on Romantic notions of art and novelty. As Lynn Schofield Clark and others point out, there is a deep connection between material goods and how we draw upon communal and cultural symbols in order to maintain, develop, and establish identity.[11] For such disparate subgroups as Goths, punks, and Orthodox Jews, material objects – especially clothing – are key

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[8] This fits well with a tradition of scholarship that espouses a German Protestant iconoclasm, subsequently taken up by the Frankfurt School. Colleen McDaniel, "Scrambling the Sacred and the Profane," in *Religion, Media, and Culture: A Reader*, ed. by Gordon Lynch and Jolyon Mitchell (New York: Routledge, 2012).
[9] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 483.
[10] Calvin Klein, Webpage. 2013. Accessed November 18, 2013. http://explore.calvinklein.com/en_GB/explore/ckcalvinklein.
[11] Lynn Schofield-Clark, "Why study popular culture? or, how to build a case for your thesis in a religious studies or theology department," in Gordon Lynch (ed.) *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 10-11.

sites in the creation of individual identity, expressed in the visible, material, and embodied identification with a particular community.

It is also significant that, precisely when Taylor does discuss popular culture, his sole referenced source to the wider field of commodification, popular culture, and religion is Naomi Klein's *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. Klein's work takes a critical stance towards means of production and especially the power of companies to influence and shape meaning within society. Klein's work here can be placed in the critique of culture and the culture industry associated with the Frankfurt School of thought. In a similar line, Taylor claims that "Of course, it goes without saying that a more genuine search for authenticity begins only where one can break out of the Logo-centric language generated by trans-national corporations."[12] It is obvious: trans-national corporations manipulate us. Unless we reject their language, maybe even reject their products completely, we are slaves to their influence. Taylor echoes a deep-rooted academic suspicion of the hegemonic forces in popular culture that impact and assert control over our lives. However, such a view also displays a one-sided approach to the topic.[13]

Taylor's use of popular culture, but his failure to engage the larger field of the study of popular culture, is not unique. In many ways his willingness to use elements of popular culture in his analysis is better than most. For many scholars, the question is often less the legitimacy of the study of popular culture, than the validity of this field as an appropriate tool for the exploration of certain kinds of topics. Few would question popular culture is critical to the study of contemporary youth culture. What is much more contentious is whether one needs to know about Captain America in order to gage the shifts in American political culture. By and large, the interaction between such fields as philosophy and political theory with popular culture is

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[12] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 483.

[13] There is a conflict of values here. On the one hand there is a desire to note the way in which Taylor might be right to be concerned about the effect of advertising upon culture. On the other, this comes into conflict with the equal need to be aware of a larger picture before passing judgement. This dissertation chooses for the latter option.

reserved to anecdotal examples to embellish an account,[14] or mined for examples of marginalization of various subgroups within a dominant culture.[15]

The field of secularization is a case in point. Very few accounts in political theory engage findings within the field of popular culture and religion. This is unfortunate, as the question of secularization has been extensively explored in this field. Theoretical accounts of the deprivatization of religion and critiques of subtraction theories of secularization are well established in the field of popular culture and religion, and have been for the last two decades, spanning a wide variety of monographs, articles, and essays.[16] The failure to engage and address a significant body of literature that grapples with critical components of modern culture results in significant blind spots for discussions of secularization within political theory. Perhaps most significantly is the reliance upon models of audience interaction based upon the Frankfurt School, which has long been questioned within the field of cultural studies due to its over-exaggeration of the passivity of the audience. An illustrative example that deals with secularization and culture from the perspective of political thought might be beneficial to examine here.

Jose Casanova's 1994 work, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, is widely regarded as a key contribution to the question of secularization within the field of political science. One of

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[14] While academics do occasionally take their cue from popular culture and build arguments from it, this tends to be the exception. Far more often references to popular culture merely serve as rhetorical examples to embellish accounts, assuming the conclusions that they draw are self-evident and have no need to be passed through the lens of the discipline of media or cultural studies. A notable exception to this is David Carrier's *The Aesthetics of Comics* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000). In this interesting work he argues that the special blend of image and text of the comic book form might also serve to question certain established conceptions regarding both perception and mind/body dualism.

[15] E.g.: Terrence R. Wandtke (ed.), *The Amazing Transforming Superhero! Essays on the Revision of Characters in Comic Books, Film and Television* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2007); Stuart Hall, 'What is this "black" in black popular culture?' *Social Justice*, Vol. 20, No. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 1993), 104-114; Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[16] E.g.: Conrad Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003); Rodney Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P.," *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (Autumn 1999), pgs. 249-273; Eric Mazur and Kate McCarthy (eds.), *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*; Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving way to Spirituality* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005); Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Aliens to Angels: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural*. The basic premise of all these works is that religious/spiritual meaning is still being sought, even if in non-traditional places. To speak of the 'retreat' of religion, as in standard secularization theory, doesn't hold up to cultural evidence to the contrary.

his central contentions is that, counter to arguments of secularization that saw an inevitable retreat by religion from the public sphere, the opposite in fact was occurring. Rather than retreat, religion was re-emerging as a major force in world politics. In this work, Casanova stresses a desire to "call into question those theories of secularization which have tended not only to assume but also to prescribe the privatization of religion in the world."[17] In particular,

> What we need are better theories of the intermeshing of public and private spheres. In particular, we need to rethink the issue of the changing boundaries between differentiated spheres and the possible structural roles religion may have within these differentiated spheres as well as the role it may have in challenging boundaries themselves.[18]

His exploration of the phenomenon of secularization is illuminating and still highly relevant.[19] However, in his analysis of the interaction of public and private spheres, Casanova's study would be enriched by turning to the field of popular culture, religion and media. Television, movies, radio, magazines and newspapers all reach into the home, the private sphere, where they shape and mobilize public perception and action. Bridging the boundary between private and public, studies into the interaction of media and religion would seem to be prime sites for explorations into the deprivatization of religion. Furthermore, by 1994, the date of the publication of Casanova's book, there was a wealth of literature already published on televangelism and its audiences, an aspect Casanova examines.[20]

Instead of drawing upon this body of research, Casanova opts for a more traditional approach. He focuses on Jerry Falwell's *Listen, America!* (1980) as his prime example of an

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[17] Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 6.
[18] Ibid., 7.
[19] See Jose Casanova, "Public Religions Revisited," in *Religion: Beyond the Concept*, Ed. by Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press., 2008), 101-119.
[20] Especially Stewart Hoover's, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988) that helped set the stage for more integrative approaches to religion, media and culture, which have continued to widely influence the field. See also: Razelle Frankl, *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), Quentin Schultze, "The Mythos of the Electronic Church," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1987), pgs. 245-261; Steve Bruce, *Pray TV: Televangelism in America* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Janice Peck, *The Gods of Televangelism: The Crisis of Meaning and the Appeal of Religious Television* (Lexington: Greenwood Press, 1993). Instead, Casanova limits his sources on Jerry Falwell and televangelism to two sources: Jeffrey K. Hadden's, "Religious Broadcasting and the Mobilization of the New Christian Right," in Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, *Secularization and Fundamentalism Reconsidered* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), and Tina Rosenberg, "How the Media Made the Moral Majority," *Washington Monthly*, May 1982.

ideological manifesto of the Moral Majority movement in the 1980s. While *Listen, America!* is certainly an important text for understanding American fundamentalist Protestant interaction with politics, nowhere is there a discussion of Falwell's rise to prominence through the building of a successful media empire incorporating radio, television, and print. Without this distribution network, it is unclear if *Listen, America!* would have had the impact it did. According to Nielson ratings, *Old Time Gospel Hour* had a weekly audience of 1.2 million even before the publication of *Listen, America!*[21] It was the impact of television to mobilize the Moral Majority that caused social critic Norman Lear his greatest concern.[22] There is no discussion in *Public Religions in the Modern World* of the pseudo-charismatic relationship established between Falwell and his audience, creating an illusion of community fundamental to his rise to prominence.[23] Nor is there a discussion of the intensification of traditional evangelical preaching through the use of various television techniques, which also served to intensify this connection.[24] As David Diekema observes, "The televangelist is presented as depending on the good faith and commitment of the audience to achieve his divinely mandated goals. Important to all these appeals is the establishment of responsiveness between televangelist and audience."[25] It is not clear if the Moral Majority movement would have had the same impact if television and radio did not help create the image of Falwell's connection with his audience, or create the impression of a moral majority in the first place.[26] It is not that a study of Falwell's manifesto is unimportant, but that the role of television and the dynamic of Falwell's interaction with his audience cannot be ignored.

One of the reasons for the lingering aversion on the part of some philosophers, political theorists, and even some cultural studies scholars to a constructive engagement with popular

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[21] Peter Horsfield, "Chapter 8: The Size of the Religious Television Audience," in *Religious Television: The American Experience* (New York: Longman, 1984). http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=1627&C=1588.

[22], Margaret O'Brien-Steinfels and Peter Steinfels, "The New Awakening: Getting religion in the video age," *Channels,* Vol. 2, No. 5 (1983), 24.

[23] David. A. Diekema, "Televangelism and the moderated charismatic relationship," *Social Science Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (1991), 143-163; cf. Razelle Frankl. *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion*; Jeffrey K. Hadden and Charles E. Swann. *Prime Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1981); Peter G. Horsfield, *Religious Television: The American Experience*.

[24] Goethals, "The Electronic Golden Calf," 135.

[25] Diekema, "Televangelism and the moderated charismatic relationship," 149-150.

[26] For instance, Falwell often claimed to have a viewing audience of 7 to 14 million followers, while his highest Nielson rating only gave him a television audience of 1.4 million; William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books., 2005), 213.

culture, is undoubtedly a result of the continuing influence of the Frankfurt School of thought, particularly their deep critique of mass culture. The thinkers of the Frankfurt School were heavily influenced by their experience of the use of media as propaganda in both Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, which coloured and shaped their perspectives and approach regarding issues of mass and popular culture. Central to their critique was establishing clear demarcations between 'high' art, folk art, and mass art (art distributed and popularized through mass production).[27] 'High' art, held within it the tension of presenting the beautiful, along with the ugly, thus requiring a sustained and disciplined reflection.[28] By probing and seeking reconciliation between the two, art aimed at the betterment of the person; "the Frankfurt School's disparagement of popular culture is found in its insistence that art – and especially *avant-garde* art – is the cultural activity where the resources necessary to revolutionize the consciousness of the masses can be expected to rise."[29] By creating cultural products which presented "the beautiful minus its ugly counterpart," mass culture creates "sugary trash" or "kitsch" suitable for easy consumption, minus any cultural challenge, critique, or resources for revolution.[30]

In this view, mass popular culture becomes a sort of easy opiate for the common people whom industry producers seek to pacify. By making mass culture readily and easily available, there is less incentive to maintain practices of folk culture which contain within them ways of organizing and resisting the homogenizing effect of urbanization and industrialization. It is far easier and rewarding on the surface after a long day of work to simply turn on the television or put on a record, rather than go through the trouble to organizing, rehearsing and playing music, or engaging in other 'folk' activities. But without the sense of community formed by the maintenance of folk activities, people are easier targets for class manipulation. Noam Chomsky,

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[27] Distinctions between the three classifications of culture (high, folk, and popular) have to do especially with the size of the audience. High or elite culture, often transmitted in written form, has a limited audience by its very intention, and is addressed to persons who are perceived to have superior backgrounds or more sophisticated taste. Folk culture, often transmitted orally, also has a limited audience, because oral communication is roughly limited to the more immediate family, community, or other local or regional group. Popular culture might be communicated in many ways, but it most often becomes widespread, and thus popular, though mass media. As its very name implies, popular culture is marked by its larger audience. Bruce David Forbes, "Introduction: Finding Religion in Unexpected Places," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, 3.
[28] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge and Keegan Hall, 1984), 72.
[29] Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 47.
[30] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 72.

arguably a contemporary descendent of the Frankfurt School,[31] states regarding modern popular culture; "This isn't real popular culture, the real art of the people. This is just stuff which is served up to them to rot their minds. Real popular culture is folk art – coalminers' songs and so forth."[32]

However, curiously, it is 'the people' who are rarely given a say in what constitutes 'legitimate' folk art in such analyses. Instead, it is the philosopher or critical cultural theorist who claims the right of legitimizing cultural forms, often premised on an essentialist understanding of community to which they are not a part. In such a reading, the cultural forms of the past – coalminers' songs, black spirituals – must be the cultural forms of the present and future. This leaves little place for innovation in forms, nor the ability for cultural forms to change to suit current expressions of community self-identity, at least not without the permission of the cultural critic. The old spirituals – which at one point were new themselves – expressed a particular perception of communal reality, something which the 'nitty-gritty hermeneutics' of some of today's modern rap also accomplishes.[33] Likewise, in terms of fostering community amongst diaspora Hinduism, the televised production of the two Hindu epics – the *Ramayan* from 1987-1988, and the *Mahabharata* running from 1988-1990 - were highly significant events.[34] To discount either cultural expression on the basis of a perceived, pure, 'legitimate' folk art is problematic.

Linked to questions of legitimacy and the community, the Frankfurt School has also been criticized for its lack of appreciation for audience agency. As John Lough polemically stated, the Frankfurt model "presupposes an audience of powerless dupes, with all the constituents making the same reading."[35] For most within the Frankfurt School, the power of industry is too great,

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[31] While Chomsky disavows any direct connection between his thought and that of the Frankfurt School (Robert F. Barsky, *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 25) his arguments in *Manufacturing Consent* seem directly in line with those of the Frankfurt School, who posit that any media will be used and corrupted by the media industry in the transmission of cultural messages.

[32] Noam Chomsky, quoted in "Let's stay chummy, Chomsky," by Pat Kane, in *The Independent* (Monday, June 23, 1997) http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/lets-stay-chummy-chomsky-1257575.html.

[33] Anthony Pinn, "Rap Music and its Message: On Interpreting the Contact between Religion and Popular Culture," in Forbes and Mahan, *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, 258-269; see also Anthony Pinn, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum Books, 1995), 113-138.

[34] Marie Gillespie, "The role of media in religious transnationalism," in *Religion, Media, and Culture: A Reader*, ed. by Gordon Lynch and Jolyon Mitchell (New York: Routledge, 2012), 98-110.

[35] John Lough, "Analysis of Popular Culture," in *The Media Book*, Chris Newbold, et al (eds.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 219.

creating a hypnotizing effect on the consumer through the production of easily digestible mass culture. Such fare hooks them on light, 'sugary' culture, which makes forms of art that could truly revolutionize their conditions unpalatable. "It is a katharsis for the masses," Theodore Adorno, one of the main thinkers of the Frankfurt School, wrote, "but katharsis which keeps them all the more firmly in line."[36] This, however, seems to neglect the potential of audiences to read into the music alternative messages; it neglects sites of resistance and subversion in culture as either non-existent or irrelevant. But once again, from whose point of view? From those within a community? Or those outside who judge revolution and transformation by standards that are not those of the community?

A reverse argument might be made to the Frankfurt School: 'high' art and 'high' culture exhausts one's energy, making one susceptible to the hypnotizing effect of form. Classical forms of music, as well as high art – even *avant-garde* art – encourage a passive recipient.[37] Toe-tapping at a Mozart symphony tends to be frowned upon. The body is held in reserve, even when one observes other bodies in performance art. Even *avant-garde* art that tries to provoke a response, often seeks a reconciliation of mind and body that privileges form and thought. All of this encourages a separation between mind and body, with the mind as central. Yet in such a system revolution fizzles because revolution seeks the freeing of bodily oppression as well as mental ones, but the body is already considered secondary. The action necessary for revolution and transformation comes through the body, and this transformation is short-circuited. What would be much better for transformation is the hip-swinging, feet-moving, pulse of Rock & Roll that does not sacrifice the body for the mind.

So too comics books, those 'low,' mass produced products for childish consumption; they, too, become a key possibility for transformation. Comic books are premised on an active – as opposed to passive – participation in the narrative that goes beyond simple reading. On every page it is the reader who determines how to read the panels, and determines the nature of the relation and closure of those panels to one another.[38] However, in the end, such a claim

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[36] Theodore Adorno, "On Popular Music," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1941), 42.
[37] Or, conversely, avant-garde art becomes a simple extension of a navel-gazing tendency within society; David Morgan, "Studying Religion and Popular Culture: Prospects, Presuppositions, Procedures" in *Between Sacred and Profane*, 24.
[38] Thierry Groensteen, in his *The System of Comics*, trans. by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) emphasizes the need to approach comics based upon the visual code established within the work, as well as insisting that the individual panel can never be read in isolation, but only within the context of

regarding 'high' art would be subject to the same critique as the Frankfurt School's claim regarding popular culture. While there might be seeds of truth in both assessments, both interpretations neglect the potential agency of the audience.

Not all members of the Frankfurt School followed the same train of thought. Walter Benjamin raised concerns regarding 'high' art similar to the above critique. For Benjamin, one concern was that the traditional aura attached to a piece of art meant that much time was spent on the appreciation of the work in abstract, without allowing its 'specialness' to fade into the background so that a call to action might be heard. Rather than spending time studying or appreciating Michelangelo's *David*, many people seek to track down the original work – despite a cast replica standing in the original spot – in order to say they have seen and been in the 'presence' of the original sculpture. The time in its presence, though, can be remarkably short – just enough to get a photograph as proof. A large amount of money and time are devoted to this participation in presence, rather than transformation. On the other hand, it makes no sense to attempt to find the original reel of *Citizen Kane* or *The Wizard of Oz*, as the purpose of the process was mechanical reproduction. This freedom from the aura of a work of art means that criticism and awareness of the film's message can become the dominant preoccupation instead of a quest for presence. As Benjamin notes in his highly influential essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," mechanical reproduction of mass culture "emancipated the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual."[39] This functions to make the masses into critics by forcing the cultic, ritualistic value to recede into the background, opening up a new

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the whole work (5). Charles Hatfield notes in *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, "Comics are challenging because they offer a form of reading that resists coherence, a form at once seductively visual and radically fragmented. Comic art is a mixed form, and reading comics a tension-filled experience. Recent criticism both within and without the academy has recognized that comics solicit the reader's participation in a unique way; through their very plurality of means, they advert to that incompleteness or indeterminacy, which, as Wolfgang Iser has argued, urges readers to take up the constitutive act of interpretation" (xiii). While Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994) famously made the point, "Every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. An equal partner in crime known as the reader. I may have drawn an axe being raised in this example, but I'm not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why." (68)

[39] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*, Eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 23.

"politics of art."[40] With no longer a fixation on cult and ritual, mass art, especially film, allows the person to become aware of the political values articulated in the object.[41]

Richard Hoggart's 1957 work *The Uses of Literacy*, and Raymond Williams' 1958 book, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, further challenged some of these core assumptions regarding culture and its consumption. Hoggart's analysis of culture, while largely written from a Marxist position sympathetic with the approach of the Frankfurt School, diverged from the school in two important ways. First, coming from a working class background himself, he challenged the idea that working class people mindlessly accepted the messages of mass culture. Instead, he attributed an agency to the working classes hitherto not afforded them, which shifted the focus away from the producer of culture, to an acknowledgement of the role of the receiver in negotiating meaning. Second, Hoggart used literary criticism to examine newspapers, periodicals, and magazines consumed by the working class. This was based on the assumption that such work sought to convey insights about life just like more sophisticated literature, and so working class periodicals could be examined by employing the same methods, thus raising popular works to the same level as more established literature.[42]

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[40] Ibid., 33.

[41] More recent studies have attempted to re-examine the place of both Benjamin and Adorno within the study of popular culture. In the case of Benjamin, Udi E. Greenberg, notes the complicated development of the interest in Benjamin scholarship as itself tied up with certain changing views of the role of the academic ("The Politics of the Walter Benjamin Industry," *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2008), 53-70). Adorno, too, continues to be a difficult figure within studies of popular culture because he escapes easily categorization. He does allow for a level of audience agency to engage and fight back against systems of control within the culture industry, (Theodore Adorno, "Culture and Industry Reconsidered," *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 103) but is ultimately concerned that the overwhelming inter-connectedness of that industry with society makes a fair outcome difficult. Gordon Lynch likens Adorno's view to that of the *Matrix* movies: while it is theoretically possible to escape, the mechanisms in place make compliance to the system and its simple pleasures appear often preferable than struggle. (Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 70) In this way, Adorno's work is still challenging in its pessimistic outlook regarding the possibility of humans "to act freely and creatively within the constraints of the culture industry." (*Ibid*, 76) Additionally, Adorno's work continues to raise questions regarding the influence of industry in both culture and cultural analysis. While Adorno and the Frankfurt School spoke of "mass culture," there is an increasing movement in the literature away from talk of 'mass' media to a recognition of the development of highly specialized and targeted segmentation of the media. (E.g.: Steven H. Chaffee and Metzger Miriam J., "The End of Mass Communication?," *Mass Communication & Society*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2001), 365-379, though such claims have been made since at least the 1970s; see also: James E. Grunig, *Decline of the Global Village: How Specialization Is Changing the Mass Media* (Bayside, N.Y.: General Hall, 1976), and Richard Maisel, "The Decline of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (1973), 159-170) However, there is a level in which this apparent individualization is itself a manufactured 'pseudo-individualization' packaged for consumption. In this situation the disappearance of 'mass media' only means the addition of another level of sophistication in industry influence.

[42] Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996), 44. Turner adds, "The book's most significant acheivement, however, is the demonstration of the interconnections among various aspects of public culture – pubs, working-mens's clubs, magazines and sports, for instance – and the structures of an

Raymond Williams, in his work, directly challenged notions of culture and art as innate categories rather than historically constructed entities. He traced the development in these categories, especially their moral connotations, to the period of time around the Industrial Revolution. According to Williams, "the history of the idea of culture is a record of our reaction, in thought and feeling, to the changed conditions of our common life."[43] He connected the idea of culture with that of class and of art, indicating ways in which their claim to moral worth and value were connected more to political and social developments than inherent to the concepts themselves.[44] This comes out especially clear in his *The Long Revolution* where he points out that our conceptions of literary classics are not based on an established criterion, but our own present social and moral needs: "Emily Bronte would now be said by many critics to be the finest novelist of the decade, but *Wuthering Height*s, for a long time, was carried by the fame of Charlotte, and its major importance, now, is related to changes in twentieth century literature, moving towards the theme and language of *Wuthering Heights* and away from the main fictional tradition of the decade in which it was written."[45] Due to his influence in tracking the development in attitudes towards art based upon political and cultural constructions, Williams is recognized alongside Hoggart as founding members of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. This School has exerted tremendous influence on the field of cultural studies with its emphasis on a reciprocal approach to understanding culture: both audiences and producers are involved in the complex process of creating cultural understanding, rather than assuming producers produce to a disengaged public.

Stuart Hall, another prominent member of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, examined the process of the transmission of cultural objects in his influential work on encoding and decoding in 1973. In his essay "Encoding/Decoding," Hall notes four main ways of decoding cultural objects: the dominant/hegemonic position, where the message of the encoder is accepted; the professional position, where the encoder's message is bracketed – though accepted – and processed for professional qualities; the negotiated position, which takes the hegemonic character of the encoded message, but within the receiver own grounds; and the globally contrary

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individual's private, everyday life – family roles, gender relations, language patterns, the community's 'common sense'." (44)

[43] Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 295.

[44] Ibid., xv.

[45] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), 59.

position, which understands the encoder's intended message, but refuses to accept the meaning as given.[46]

With the publication of Dick Hebdige's 1979 study, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, Hall's category of globally contrary acts of decoding came to the fore. In his study, Hebdige examined several youth subcultures and their tendency to re-appropriate objects for new purposes. One of the prime examples of re-appropriation and resistance in Hebdige's study was the British 'punk' subgroup. At the core of this group's resistance was the rupture between the 'natural' and the constructed, with much energy often spent on *constructing* what was supposedly the natural. Against the view that sought a 'natural' looking appearance through the use of make-up and other beauty products, hair and make-up for the punk subgroup was promoted in such a way as to be seen *as* make-up and hair dye. Clothing that revealed its manufactured essence, emphasizing obvious zippers and seams, were also popular. Even safety pins "were taken out of their domestic 'utility' context and worn as gruesome ornaments through the cheek, ear, or lip … as self-conscious commentaries on the notions of modernity and taste."[47] The subgroups Hebdige examined understood what the dominant/hegemonic message of the objects was, yet refused to accept that message, consciously re-appropriating the objects for a "globally contrary position."

The insight that this work offered, and others that followed, was simple yet crucial: the culture industries did not control in a totalizing way the message of the product they transmitted. The nexus of competing influences surrounding the reception of the cultural object became a central subject of discussion in cultural studies. The discussion moved beyond a simple producer-product-consumer relation, to understanding how the communication of new and competing messages were created, and how they affected other messages in turn. Hebdige's work inspired many other such studies within cultural studies on ways of resistance and negotiations between the dominant society and various subgroups.[48]

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[46] The idea was originally formulated in Hall's essay, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," but throughout the decade was reworked until he finished his final version, "Encoding/Decoding" in *Culture, Media, Language*. Stuart Hall et al (eds.) (New York: Routledge, 1980), 128-138.

[47] Dick Hebdige, *Subculture, the Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), 107.

[48] E.g.: Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (London: Routledge, 1993); Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

However, both the Frankfurt School and the emerging field of cultural studies shared a basic assumption: the separation of media and culture, and ultimately media and religion. Underlying both of these positions is the view that we should examine and understand media by its effect upon human behaviour and thought, rather than in terms of its integration into daily life. In doing so, a separation between media, culture, and religion is created. Under the influence of such an assumption, it is logical to ask what is the *effect* of media/popular culture on religion, and vice versa. They are seen and presented as two discrete entities, and so it is their effect upon one another that is the proper focus of study for those looking at popular culture and religion. The question becomes: how do film/television/video games/etc. affect the human person, who is treated as a buffered, discrete entity, over against the entity of the medium? This working assumption came to be known as the 'effects paradigm' in media studies. At root, the media "effects paradigm" focuses not only on the effect of media on life, but operates from the viewpoint that media influences otherwise well-socialized and functional individuals and groups, rather than perceiving forms of media as tools for particular acts of communication. In other words, as Stewart Hoover points out, the "effects paradigm" considers media in relation to pathology: how do diverse media affect an otherwise healthy culture or community.[49]

The result was to enforce the perception that media and religion were two competing forces in the more 'neutral' sphere of culture. Both of these parts of culture sought to communicate messages about life, both sought ever larger audiences, and both sought to control and shape culture in important ways after their own image. Religion, focused on matters of ultimate concern, preached a moral message that pointed beyond this life towards a transcendent reality. This was the case even if the object of ultimate concern was a largely immanent one. Issues of justice, for example, when raised to the level of a universal quality that transcends human situatedness, can become a matter of near ultimate concern – such as in the case with Batman's near-existential pursuit of Justice. But media, dominated by advertisements and more immediate gratifications, present a picture of life seemingly opposed to transcendence or immanent depth. Religion, in this way of viewing things, represents traditional values, while the media represents hedonism. They are two opposed spheres, each communicating a message, so

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[49] Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, 41. The field of 'positive psychology' in an analogous way claims that much of psychology has been based on pathology, and how various events impact an already fully-functioning system. 'Positive psychology' examines instead how events and things contribute to the overall well-being of an individual.

it is completely understandable that a scholar would want to analyze the effect of religion or media upon the other. Working under this paradigm, what other way is there to approach the question of popular culture, media, and religion?

Significant developments occurred in the 1970s with important impact on the wider field of religious studies, as well as the modern study of media, culture, and religion. In the latter field, the developments coalesced around the work of James Carey. In his seminal essay, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," and throughout his subsequent work, Carey brought together media studies, cultural studies and religion, though his theory of communication as ritual. According to Carey, "A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs."[50] At heart, Carey argued, there are two models of communication: the ritual model of communication, focused on the maintenance of community; and the transmission model of communication, focused on the speed and accurate transfer of information over distance. In the American context, linked with practical needs to communicate over long distances, and ideological needs for centralized control, the transmission model of communication has been the major focus of study.[51] The telegraph enabled people to communicate over vast distances, but it also served as a way of asserting control over space. Drawing upon Harold Innis's work on the history of communication, the transmission model is space-based, but there is an older model of communication that focuses on communication over time.[52] This communication of information over time finds its orientation in the common root it shares with other words such as "commonness," "community," "communion," and "communication."[53]

For Carey, the notion of communication as ritual is rooted in religion.[54] Carey is deeply indebted here to the work of Clifford Geertz and his concept of culture. Geertz's anti-functionalist, culturally-based definition of religion is well enough known not to need reiteration here.[55] For Carey the crucial element was Geertz's focus on culture as an act of interpretation. In

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[50] James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 18.
[51] Ibid., esp. 15-18.
[52] Ibid., esp. "Space, Time, and Communication: A Tribute to Harold Innis," 142-172.
[53] Ibid., 18.
[54] Ibid., 18-19.
[55] Religion is defined by Geertz classically as: "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish a powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of

a passage almost as well-known as his definition of religion, Geertz states, "… man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."[56] Under Geertz's interpretation, religion becomes "a system of symbols that provides its believers with a coherent understanding or valuation of life, a meaningful, ordered world in which interaction and interdependence are enabled."[57] Carey integrated this perspective into his work bridging cultural studies and media, resulting in an approach that highlighted an ongoing interaction of meaning-making and social reflexivity within culture. Instead of religion and media being opposed, both of them interacted and were foundational in the formation and maintenance of community.

Victor Turner's notion of ritual was also influential on Carey's choice of the word to define one of his two models of communication. Drawing upon Geertz's idea of cultural reflexivity, Turner developed the idea of ritual not as a projection of existing social structures, but to draw attention to ritual's capacity as a mode of expressing cultural ideas and dispositions.[58] According to Catherine Bell, Turner's development, "also pointed the way to a further perspectival shift that would view such cultural expression as the very activity by which culture is constantly constructed and reproduced."[59] In Turner's understanding of ritual, every ritual consists of three phases. During the initial phase, the individual participant is first divided from everyday life. This then allows for the liminal phase – between division and reintegration with society – where previous understandings of social order are suspended, allowing for reflexivity and change. In the reintegration phase, the individual returns to everyday life seeking the transformation of culture.

In regards to popular culture and media, Turner himself applied these ideas to theatre, film, and television, which were also seen within a ritual perspective. For Turner, connecting film and other media to ritual meant that both media and ritual served not just in the maintenance

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existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System" in *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, eds. William Armand Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt (New York: HarperCollins, 1979), 90.
[56] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.
[57] David Morgan, "Religion, Media, Culture: The Shape of the Field," in *Key Words in Religion, Media, and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 5.
[58] Catherine Bell, "Performance" in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 208.
[59] Ibid.

of conservative ideologies, but also a creative role. Taking Turner's ideas, Newcomb and Alley use Turner's conception of ritual more directly to new media, suggesting that through the use of technology they invite us into a liminal place of time and space by which we can explore new reconfigurations of the world.[60] Also highly influential for later developments, a recognition of the performative aspects of ritual – ritual enacted through the body – gave added validity to the importance of the body in both religion and media. Ritual as participating in the creative construction and development of culture was also a fundamental part of Carey's idea regarding communication.

This does not mean that Carey's and Turner's conceptions regarding communication, ritual, and culture were immediately embraced. As David Morgan notes, Carey's essay gave birth to new ways of thinking about communication and religion, but it still took time to fully germinate.[61] Stewart Hoover's (1988) *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church*, as well as Jesús Martín-Barbero's (1987) *De los medios a las mediaciones*[62] began to shift the conversation away from the transmission of communication towards a view of media as a form of ritual. At the same time, their work began to pose serious questions to the validity of the "media effects" paradigm. Hoover's work, influenced by his prior focus on televangelism, tried to develop a way of looking at religion and media that allowed for a greater range of religious phenomena to be studied in a field that was dominated by Protestant Christian studies. Following Geertz's idea of religion, Hoover conceptualized the study of mass media and

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[60] Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley, *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 18-45.

[61] Morgan, "Religion, media, culture: the shape of the field," 2; Indeed, a media effects paradigm and functionalist treatment of religion and popular culture held sway throughout the 1970s and 80s, significantly impacting the beginnings of the study of popular culture and religion. Arguably the first major works in the field, Robert Short's *The Gospel According to Peanuts* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965), and Robert Jewett's *The Captain America Complex: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), along with Nelson's *Your God is Alive and Well and Appearing in Popular Culture*, all function within a clear media effects paradigm, largely under the assumption that media 'effects' religion, but little belief that the opposite is also possible. Malcolm Muggeridge also follows this assumption, even positing that the very idea of "Christian broadcasting" was in some important sense a contradiction in terms ("Christ and the Media," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 21, no 3 (Sept. 1978), 193-198; some of these themes are also expanded in his better known work *Christ and the Media* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977)). Even Robert Bellah's seminal *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) relies heavily on both a functionalist understand of religion (religion is defined by the functions it performs for the person or society) and the media effects paradigm in understanding and creating almost a structural dichotomy between individualism and commitment, with media fostering individualism and religion representing commitment.

[62] Translated into English in 1993 as *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations* (London; Newbury Park: SAGE Publications, 1993).

religion as being grounded on "religious consciousness" understood as "the individual's relationship with such [religious] systems, symbolic and real, and the moods and motivations that evolve with that involvement."[63] In practice, that meant that Hoover was able to analyze televangelism not from ready-made functionalist conceptions of what and what did not entail 'religion', but following the culturalist turn, allowed religious systems and symbols to be generated from within their context of use by individuals employing various media.

In *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations*,[64] Martín-Barbero pushed the argument further, by directly challenging the assumption of the separation of the categories of religion and media. For Martín-Barbero, the idea of *mediation* functions as the most adequate way of understanding the relationship between media, religion and culture. David Morgan, a leading figure in the field, describes the impact of Martín-Barbero's idea of mediation; "Rather than positing a discrete media product whose impact might be measured as this or that effect or gratification, Martín-Barbero urges us to reckon mediation as a process of engagement that includes struggle, resistance, and an ensuing transformation of consciousness in which media take a part."[65] In Martín-Barbero's understanding, "The mass media are the places where many people—indeed, an increasing number of people—construct the meaning of their lives. The media offer the opportunity for people to come together to understand the central questions of life, from the meaning of art to the meaning to death, of richness, of growth, of beauty, of happiness, and of pain."[66]

Writing in 1997, citing television as a prime example, Martín-Barbero notes that media is the site of the visualization of our common myths, and thus acts as the communicator of deep meaning; "We find our motivating symbols in our mythos, from the myths that give meaning to the life of the poor to the myth that sustains our poor life. It is television that is articulating and catalyzing the integrating mythos of our society."[67] Martín-Barbero is not claiming that media has *become* a religion, but that it serves to communicate the meaning and nature of the sacred

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[63] Stewart M. Hoover, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic*, 22.
[64] See also Jesús Martín-Barbero, "Mass Media as a Site of Resacralization of Contemporary Cultures," in *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*, eds. Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1997), 102-116.
[65] Morgan, "Religion, media, culture: the shape of the field," 6-7.
[66] Martín-Barbero, "Mass Media as a Site of Resacralization of Contemporary Culture," 108.
[67] Ibid., 111.

and profane, transcendence, and enchantment in life. Rather than a separation between religion and media and their competing impact on our lives, something else has occurred – a mediation.

> Despite all the promise of modernity to make religion disappear, what has really happened is that religion has modernized itself. Religion has shown itself capable of eating modernity alive and making modernity an important ingredient for its own purposes. What we are witnessing, then, is not the conflict of religion and modernity, but the transformation of modernity into enchantment by linking new communicative technologies to the logic of popular religiosity.[68]

In this context, religion has not disappeared because it uses media itself in various and engaging ways.

In *Religion in the Media Age* Hoover forcefully advances this argument for a mediated, integral relationship between media and religion. For Hoover, we can see a convergence between culture, media and religion. In this frame, culture provides "*a common set of symbols, ideas and languages*, elements that become part of a common cultural 'currency'. (italics in original)"[69] But in this context, following Carey's ritual model of communication, 'media' has a much greater connection to the idea of mediation that it does to medium. Indeed, the communication of thoughts, ideas, etc., is mediated through form by drawing upon a shared cultural currency, and articulated through a particular medium.[70] The medium might be television, film, or comic books, but it can just as easily be cell phones, novels, poetry, or the internet. In such a model, religion is not opposed to media, but draws upon the mediated cultural currency to express its messages. In turn, the messages are received by the audience with the opportunity to interpret the mediated sign as they will, which then also can become part of culture, and part of cultural language.

The creation of internet memes is an interesting example of such an interaction. Indeed, increasingly cultural products and messages are received, and receive feedback and additional use, before being returned as new cultural objects themselves. The viral video provides an interesting example. To take a recent example, in response to several state referendums in the United States to allow gay marriage, a viral video response was created entitled, "Gay men will

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[68] Ibid., 112.
[69] Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, 267.
[70] Ibid., 13.

marry your girlfriends". In the video, in a playful manner and playing on various clichés of gay men, the men threaten to marry the girlfriends of straight men if they are not allowed to marry whom they want. In two weeks the video registered close to 2 million views, more than many television shows. Just as interesting, it spawned various responses almost overnight, using the same style as the original, and the same form of humour. The "Straight men respond" video garnered almost 1 million views within the same two week period, while the reverse video "Gay women will marry your boyfriends," received more than 2.5 million views for the same time period. All of these were created independently of each other, but all are closely connected and build upon one another using and transforming shared symbols to create new meaning.

The perception of the priority of media and its products to mediate cultural meaning was given added impetus in the aftermath of 9/11.[71] If meaning is mediated by the media we use, then the generation of meaning, especially deeper meanings of a religious, spiritual, or sacred character, becomes a key topic of concern. This focus on mediation, though, also initiates a return interest in the character of the various mediums themselves. David Morgan, an art historian by training, has called for greater awareness of what constitutes media and the grounds for study. Following on the work of Jeffrey Stout, who posited "more people seek their moral edification from poems, novels, essays, plays, and sermons than from moral treatises or philosophical articles,"[72] Morgan suggests the need to expand the traditional notion of media to also include "books, poetry and plays as well as newer media such as computers, the internet and mobile phones. By defining media more broadly many new areas of study become pertinent to the field of study."[73] If the focus on media is mediation, then avenues of cross-pollination begin to open up between various media as they intersect. How is the medium of orality communicated through the medium of film? How does the medium of writing and art, themselves individual acts of communication, function and interact with the comic book medium? This shift can already be seen in several journals, most notably, *ImageText* which explores how image and text combine in different media to communicate meaning. These are

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[71] Ibid., 10-11.
[72] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 163.
[73] David Morgan, "Studying religion and popular culture: prospects, presuppositions, procedures," in *Between Sacred and Profane*, 44.

intriguing questions especially in the context of religious meaning, which has often been perceived to privilege certain media over others in communicating ideas.[74]

Throughout the 1990s, following upon Hoover's idea of the "electric church" as part of a wider "marketplace" of religion, there was a shift toward economic models of religion and spirituality when examining religion and culture. This was also related to challenges to the traditional view of secularization as the retreat of religion from modern society. In this context, the economic model appeared especially useful in accounting for American exceptionalism: despite traditional theories of the rise of secularization with the advance of modernity, the United States continued to experience high rates of church attendance and religious involvement. In such a model, the religious and spiritual impulse of people remained the same, but with the increased supply of religious and spiritual resources in a pluralistic society, people could shop at the spiritual marketplace for what they liked.[75] This meant a shift to trying to understand the audience for religion through an analysis of consumption, and the self-reflective *process* of consumption.[76]

> First is the question of what *symbols* or *scripts* are available in the media environment, what we might call the "*symbolic inventory*" out of which individuals make religious or spiritual meaning. Second are the *practices of consumption*, *interaction*, *and articulation* through which those meanings are accessed, understood, and used. And third is the centering of this in *the experiences of the individuals* who are doing the consuming and the meaning-making.[77]

This development corresponded to various studies examining contemporary cultural dimensions of religion which had long been ignored, especially those focused on material religion.

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[74] C.f.: Pauline Hope Cheong (ed) *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, and Futures* (New York: P. Lang, 2012); Theodore John Rivers, *The Future of Religion and the Religion of the Future* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2012). Both works, for example, deal with the relation of digital technology and religion. But whereas the former work shows the various points of present engagement between the digital and traditional religions, the thrust of Rivers work is the emergence of technology itself as a form of religion.

[75] Stewart Hoover, "Audiences," in *Keywords in Religion, Media and Culture*, 32.

[76] C.f.: Roger Finke and Rodney Stark. *The Churching of America 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Rodney Stark and Lawrence Iannaccone. "A Supply-Side 'Reinterpretation' of the Secularization of Europe," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 33 (1994), 230-252.

[77] Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, 55-56.

Wade Clark Roof's *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Booms and the Remaking of American Religion*, Colleen McDonnell's *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*, and Laurence Moore's *Selling God: Religion in the Marketplace*, all relied upon an economic model in understanding the evolving religious marketplace. In uncovering these neglected aspects of religion, these studies in popular religious culture reinforced a key aspect of the renewed interest in ritual studies by accenting the critical role of the body and physical objects for religion. Historical studies of religious material culture, such as Robert Orsi's *Thank you, Saint Jude: Women's Devotion of the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* and David Morgan's *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images,* helped to establish that the visual and material world had a long-standing history within modern religious traditions. In regards to question of religion and culture, text-centred, belief-based doctrine was increasingly recognized as only one element of religious identity and self-construction.

In focusing on the material aspects of religion, there was a growing interest in how people actually lived out religion, rather than simply how they were taught they should live – the move from religion as ascribed to religion as achieved. This became part of an interest in "lived religion" among various scholars.

> "Lived religion," that is, religion as experienced in everyday life, offers a model for integrating the official, the popular, and the therapeutic modes of religious identity. Lived religion might be thought of as involving three crucial aspects: scripts, or sets of symbols that imaginatively explain what the world and life are about; practices, or the means whereby individuals relate to, and locate themselves within, a symbolic frame of reference; and human agency, or the ability of people to actively engage the religious worlds they help to create.[78]

If the focus was on 'lived religion', religion as achieved rather than ascribed, then the *ascribed* prohibition against syncretism – against the melding of divergent religious elements – was just that: a prohibition which could be followed or not in how one sought to *achieve* a religious life. Writing in 1985 Robert Bellah, in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, generally struck a pessimistic tone in matters concerning both religion as marketplace and syncretism. Bellah worried that the focus on individualism and the willingness

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[78] Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 41.

to switch religious adherence in search of fulfillment would lead to a sort of narcissism. But Wade Clark Roof, writing in 1993, was more open to the positive in such an approach. For Roof, those who journeyed outside of the bounds of their religious origins were following in a long line of spiritual seekers that stretched out over all of human history. Rather than lamenting the development of a spiritual marketplace, Roof sought to categorize the forms of religious life as he saw them within baby-boom culture. Focusing on the baby-boom generation, he classified their religious sensibilities into 5 general categories: born-again Christian, mainstream believers, metaphysical believers and seekers, dogmatists, and secularists. These categories are still often employed in ethnographic and sociological examinations of religion and popular culture.[79]

Drawing upon Roof's work, Robert Wuthnow saw the phenomenon of religious seeking as the major movement within American religion; the personal quest for religious meaning, a search for authenticity, was now of paramount importance in the construction of religious identity, rather than dwelling where one always had.[80] Indeed, Taylor in *A Secular Age* utilizes Roof's work to note the connection between the idea of spiritual seekers, and the connection to the quest for authenticity in spiritual life.[81] Further exploring the 'spiritual but not religious' phenomena were such works as Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead's *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* and Robert C. Fuller's *Spiritual, but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*.

Considering the awareness of materiality within the field of media and religion, it should be noted that Taylor also gives account of the rise of the body, especially in his treatment of the immanent counter-enlightenment. One key element of the immanent counter-enlightenment is precisely their rejection of Enlightenment concepts of the priority of mind and detached rationality at the expense of the body. According to Taylor, such thinkers as Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Bataille helped shift the focus to more embodied human concerns that put greater emphasis on dimensions such as sexuality, violence, and death. This opens up a richer discussion as to the value of embodied concerns – and ultimately materiality. There is a way in which Taylor is right in this regard: the thought of transgressive sexual norms, questioning and

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[79] See for example, the Lynn Schofield Clark's excellent study already mentioned.
[80] Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
[81] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 507-509.

challenging traditional sexual codes, came before the physical, embodied expression of that challenge in the sexual revolutions of the 1960s. However, the performance of such rituals of seeming transgression affected the perception of the underlying thoughts as well, transforming them in the process. There is a deep disconnect between conceptions of 'free love' of the 1960s, and its transformation into sexual impulse and instinct that adherents of the sexual revolution often now bemoan – sex becomes as much about scratching an itch than the conveyer of social change. Taylor's focus on the priority of thought has difficulty in accounting for such changes, which is also perhaps why Taylor's account in *A Secular Age* largely stops with the 1960s. In the 1960s and into the present abstracted, pure thought was being replaced not by *conceptions* of bodily experience, but by an attempt to engage in a real awareness of the role of the body through particular acts and its affect on the self. This movement away from the abstract is also a movement away from Taylor's own focus on modernity as essentially guided and structured by the power of ideas.[82]

One current prominent scholar within the field of media and religion that makes use of Taylor and serves as an interesting intersection between Taylor, media as mediation, and ritual is Gordon Lynch in his sociology of the sacred. For Lynch, there is a concern that the conceptual idea of religion functions in a context that makes it elusive as a subject of study. There are so many approaches to religion, so many questions as to what constitutes religion and what does not, that as a conceptual category it can be unwieldy. In many ways, religion simply becomes

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[82] Of greater concern in Taylor's analysis might be in his treatment of ritual and medium in understanding the self and society. Regarding ritual and its need in our current context, Taylor writes, "The aim is not to return to the earlier sacralisation of sex and violence, but to find new forms of collective ritual; rites of passage; individual and small group disciplines of prayer, fasting, devotion; modes of marking time; new ways of living conjugal sexual life; and new works of healing and sharing, which would give bodily and at times public expression to the worship of God; or the search for Nirvana; or for Moksha" (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 613-614). Taylor proceeds to note the presence of rituals in structuring life in pre-Reformation Latin Christendom, with unstated implications for today: before they had ways of marking such things, now we don't. Yet, this seems to be based upon a certain functionalist analysis of religion that privileges the past, by ignoring how modern rituals might be accomplishing similar functions, and, moving beyond functionalism, how media ritual might be working to transform those concepts – not to mention how modern media rituals, and our interactions within, might be changing what we want from religion in the first place – changing the 'functions' of religion itself. As Stewart Hoover has noted, the public rituals of mourning after 9/11 saw media take a central place in helping to understand and come to grips with national grief and trauma, signalling in important ways how civil religion itself is changing (Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, 10-11). It is interesting in this context, that in the entirety of *A Secular Age* Taylor only mentions Marshal McLuhan once – in a passing apology for borrowing the words 'hot' and 'cold' to develop an idea. And there no mention of other major figures in media theory such as Harold Innis, Walter Ong, John Dewey, or George Mead. In fact, the discussion of media itself is absent from his discussion, or largely taken for granted. This appears as a strange oversight.

the study of whatever is constructed *as* religion for a particular work.[83] Lynch attempts to separate the idea of religion from that of the sacred, drawing back from more ontological approaches to the sacred such as Otto and Eliade.

For Lynch, the quest for the element of transcendence in ontological approaches to the sacred leads to similar problems as that of religion in defining what exactly is the sacred. From a cultural sociological point of view, however, attempts to essentialize the sacred are rejected for an understanding of the sacred as implicated within a web of cultural meaning. Understood in this way, for Lynch, the sacred is understood as: "a communicative structure, common across human societies, which orientates people towards absolute realities that have a normative claim upon the conduct of social life, around which collective forms of thought, feeling, action, and identity are formed."[84] But as the sacred is not just an abstract entity, it is expressed through particular sacred forms: "I will also use the more specific term "sacred forms" to refer to specific, contingent forms of the sacred made up of a constellation of particular symbols, a shared moral community, and forms of thinking, feeling, and acting specific to that sacred form."[85] This shift to the sacred allows Lynch the ability to examine particular constellations within modern culture such as those found within religions, but also such categories as democracy, the notion of human rights, and childhood innocence as implicit in the creation of sacred forms. Such a shift towards notions of sacred forms, also offers the possibility for a better accounting for conflicts, cross-pressures, and dilemmas between these various forms, even within the individual.

Taylor's notion of fullness matches up well here, helping to support and being supported by Lynch's conception of the sacred. Shifting the content of fullness to represent various sacred forms that we take as essential, might allow for a fullness that relies less on transcendent categories and more in the construction of fullness within the self. Connecting fullness with the sacred also means that fullness becomes less about constructing the mental processes of another person, than recognizing embodied practices. For Lynch, "Sacred thought, feeling, and practice cannot, therefore, be understood as abstract entities, but as always performed through contingent

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[83] Gordon Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World: A Cultural Sociological Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.
[84] Gordon Lynch, "Public Media and the Sacred," in *Religion, Media and Culture: A Reader*, 245.
[85] Ibid.

bodies and learned through specific processes of 'body pedagogics."[86] The performative element of the sacred, and the success or failure of such performances in articulating sacred forms, becomes set within the context of a society of selves. But likewise, Taylor's historical awareness brings added depth and understanding to what is at stake in the attachment to various sacred forms, and why there is often such a conflict between them.

In terms of the superhero genre, the use of Lynch's notion of sacred forms may prove useful. For Lynch, "As absolute, normative realities, sacred forms are so obvious as to become an often assumed part of people's social worlds."[87] This is analogous in many ways to Taylor's moral sources that serve less as justifications of what is good or not, than as the sources of evaluation as to what constitutes the good itself. The modern notion of human rights is not thought of as good or bad by most people, but rather is used as the source for defining what is right or wrong in the first place. Only when the concept of the universality of the idea of human rights is threatened, do we become aware of it at all. Otherwise, it sinks in to what we take for granted as "normative reality". In acting as "normative reality" what is sacred is often lost within normativity, but also provides for a way of identifying these sacred forms precisely in their transgression, in what profanes the sacred. "The delineation of the profane as the evil that threatens the sacred," Lynch writes, "and the mundane as the logics, practices, and the spaces of everyday life, enables us to think about the ways in which the mundane can be lived according to its own habits and norms, which may be interrupted only by the more fundamental claims of the sacred and the profane at particular moments."[88]

Applied to the discussion of the superhero genre, Lynch's category of the sacred can help in identifying what is sacred, those structures of normative reality or moral sources, and in the identification of how they are profaned. Superman is forced to confront Lex Luthor not because he dislikes him, but in those moments when Luthor flouts equal justice for all as a sacred idea and moral source. However, Luthor's violation of the sacred idea of equal justice for all does not occupy the majority of his time, which leaves the vast amount of time as operating from within the mundane structure of the everyday rather than the sacred. But in the violation of justice, in the way it is violated and its response, we can identify deeper concerns and cross-pressures.

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[86] Lynch, *Sacred in the Modern World*, 24.
[87] Ibid., 28.
[88] Ibid.

Indeed, insomuch as Luthor appears justified in his actions, he also represents clues to other competing sacred sources that are part of Taylor's exploding nova of possibilities. Luthor acts illegally, but when he does so on the principle of asserting his own will to accomplish what he wants, he can be seen as a sympathetic or more complex villain because the power of self-determining human will is also conceptualized as sacred. The complexities of the villain might represent less the internal contradictions of the antagonist, than the tensions and paradoxes within our own existence.

In this chapter we have attempted to explore and present some of the major developments within the field of media, popular culture and religion. With its more natural home in the field of political theory Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* might appear to be a strange work to examine in the light of the superhero genre. However, appearances can be misleading, as attempts to describe and understand our current age without engaging question of media risk missing crucial elements. As with Jose Casanova's *Public Religions in the Modern World*, works that only focus on more traditional text-based approaches to describing modernity, risk missing key elements such as community formation. Part of the reason for the trepidation for using popular culture might be traced back to the Frankfurt School of Thought, which saw in mass culture a way for industry to control the population. The Frankfurt School has had tremendous impact within academic circles in encouraging a mistrust of industry and the mass production of culture, but it also has been seriously challenged for its one-sided approach that fails to give adequate attention to audience agency.

Starting in the 1950s with Richard Hoggart's and Raymond Williams work independently examining working class literature, and developed further in the Birmingham School of Culture, much attention has been given to the ways in which individuals appropriate and use cultural products themselves. Meaning is negotiated, in this reading, between producers and consumers, with consumers not just blindly accepting the meaning the industry producers attempt to sell. At the same time, there has been an increasing sophistication in the understanding of the role of media to mediate meaning within society. The media "effects paradigm" of media examined various mediums in light of the effect they had on community, rather than on how they were used to communicate meaning. Scholars such as Stewart Hoover, Jesús Martín-Barbero, and

James Carey have all contributed to this re-evaluation of the role of media within culture and society.

Ultimately, while there might be a series of critical concerns raised from the point of view of those who study media and religion, these concerns are not fatal to Taylor's project in *A Secular Age*. They open up the legitimate and strong possibility that there are elements within Taylor's analysis that might need correction or further development. Limits in regards to the knowledge of the methods of a particular field of study do not invalidate his conclusions. Rather, in many ways, they help spur on conversation in the hopes of further enriching Taylor's work, as well as being enriched by Taylor's work in turn. Gordon Lynch's conception of the sacred, partially based on Taylor's work on strong moral goods and their place in evaluation, is one prime example. While there might be gaps in his method, Taylor's notions of disenchantment, and the moral sources of the sublime and humanity's dark genesis still need to be tested in greater detail.

# Chapter 3
# – The Superhero Genre

The viability of the superhero genre as a resource for understanding the evolving nature of the modern self is partially evidenced by the renewed popularity and visibility of the genre in the last 15 years. In 2012, *The Avengers* set box office opening day records, on its way to becoming the 3rd highest grossing motion picture of all time. The commercial triumph of *The Avengers* built on the success of a series of films featuring other prominent Marvel superheroes – Ironman, Thor, Captain America, and the Incredible Hulk.[1] Together, these films have brought in over 2 billion dollars. With Ironman 3 and two Batman films now ranked in the top 20 highest grossing films of all time, and the commercial success of the Spiderman and X-men franchises,[2] there appears to be something within the superhero genre that resonates with movie-going audiences. Even movies creatively deconstructing the genre such as *Watchman* and *Kick-Ass* have achieved relative success. The popularity of these films may be due in part to the fact that the superhero genre is providing a resource of pertinent symbols that connects with the aspirations and dilemmas of the modern self, or the superhero genre is using cultural symbols particularly well to articulate societal concerns.

While films and comic books of the superhero genre are intimately linked,[3] it is the superhero genre in comics that is the particular focus of this study. There is one key reason for this: superhero comic books span a wealth of time and material that superhero films simply can't match. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find any genre or modern medium that has such a historical continuity of material. Even the most prolific superhero movie franchises – Superman

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[1] Along with the Wasp and Ant-man, Ironman, Thor, and the Incredible Hulk constitute the original members of the Avengers which premiered in 1963. Four issues later, the Avengers de-thawed Captain America from an iceberg, and he joined the Avengers as well.

[2] The rebooted *Man of Steel* has added to those figures, earning over $650 million worldwide, with a sequel planned for 2015.

[3] Denis O'Neil, long-time editor of DC comics, which it owned by Time-Warner, has referred to the comics medium as the "R&D division of the entertainment industry," and a "hidden asset" of Warner Bros. rather than an autonomous narrative medium in its own right. Quoted in Will Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2012), 49.

and Batman – only consist of 7 films each.[4] Yet, Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* need have no substantial connection to Christopher Nolan's 2005 *Batman Begins*, save for a vague family resemblance of character. Also, those seven movies, no matter how well done, are bound to particular ideas and distinctive visions that frame each one as an entity unto itself – if the individual movie is not successful, a sequel will likely not be made. Superhero comics, on the other hand, function very differently. To begin with, even confining our examination to the X-men family of comics from 1975-2012, and Superman from 1975-2011,[5] requires examining roughly 1000 and 1100 issues respectively, spanning over almost 40 years. These comics, in attempting to tell stories that resonate within their particular historical context, allow for cross-pressures and tensions over time to be seen, as well as cross-pressures *within* time: different creative teams working on different comic titles within the same family can produce different perspectives on the same character.[6] This provides a considerable deal of source material and nuance when testing Taylor's claims regarding culture.

Critically engaging the superhero genre presents a number of challenges for the researcher. The nature of the genre itself, with so much material published over such a long period of time, gives rise to issues of continuity and how the material should be read: whether from within a cultural and historical studies perspectives, or that of an auteur approach.[7] Issues

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[4] The James Bond franchise, on the other hand, includes 24 films within the series.

[5] *Astro City*, for its part, has run from 1995 until the present, though not through a consistent monthly schedule (1995-1998, 2003, 2005-2010, and starting again in 2013). *Promethea* ran over 32 issues from 1999 to 2005.

[6] The most classic example must be Superman's origins story, which has undergone at least six different retellings: the 1938/1939 Siegel and Shuster imagining, the 1961 summing up of the Superman mythos by Otto Binder, John Byrne's *Man of Steel* in 1986, Mark Waid's *Superman: Birthright* (2002), Geoff Johns's *Superman: Secret Origins* (2009), and the most recent re-iteration of the character by Grant Morrison for the DC Comics company-wide re-launch in "the New 52".

[7] The auteur approach privileges the work of a creative mind in the production of a cultural artefact, seeking to understand and appreciate the impact of that mind. This approach, though, runs into problems in the context of the superhero genre, and even comics in general, which is fundamentally a collaborative endeavour – especially in the superhero genre, it is very rare to find a writer who also draws the work as well. This is even seen in the recent developments regarding the form of comic book citations. Previously, a decade ago, it was enough to credit the writer in a work, now there is a very conscious decision to include the penciller and others in the citation as a tacit acknowledgement of the collaborative nature of the genre. This is also intimately wrapped up with the history of the genre where figures like Stan Lee have received much more recognition and presumption of importance in the creation of key works such as Spiderman, the Incredible Hulk, the Fantastic Four, and Dr. Strange at the expense of such very influential artists such as Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko. Spiderman, the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, are generally recognized now as much a creation of the artist who brought them to life as of the writer. E.g.: Charles Hatfield, *Hand of Fire the Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012); Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996. For an interesting example of the crucial role of the artist in manipulating the standard visual language of comics to new

of continuity abound when dealing with public figures that have sometimes been in continual publication for decades. Other challenges are related to the nature of the production of the superhero genre itself, which has historically fostered a very protective approach to the material from the companies themselves. A challenge of particular relevance for the religious studies scholar is that of the approach to the meaning and importance of the figures and images within the genre itself; whether to approach such figures as Superman and Spiderman from an essentialist/functionalist mythological approach, or through a cultural historical approach that sees myth in the context of cultural development. The former approach has been much more prevalent, leading to a focus on the creation of works of a theological and apologetic nature – both Christian and others. There have been fewer attempts to examine the superhero from a more cultural constructivist religious studies approach, though that does appear to be changing. These three challenges will be examined in more detail below.

As noted above, one major challenge in dealing with such a large amount of material over such a span of time is providing a framework to assess how such material fits together. In terms of superhero comics this particular issue is usually approached through the concept of 'continuity'. One of the first book-length academic treatments of superheroes was Richard Reynolds *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (1994), where he identified three primary forms of continuity within the genre: serial continuity, hierarchical continuity, and structural continuity.[8] For Reynolds, serial continuity refers to the continuity within an individual line of comic books that constitutes its particular narrative continuity. If a character has just been removed from a superhero team, he will not suddenly appear as part of the team again in the next issue. When there is a failure in serial continuity, there is often a perceived need to explain the discrepancy, often by "retconning" (retroactive continuity) the event as having always been the case. When John Byrne, for instance, drew Jean Grey as the Dark Phoenix flying into a star and causing it to go nova, destroying a nearby planet of 6 billion inhabitants, the editors of the X-men balked at the ethical implications. Despite writer Chris Claremont's long-term vision for Jean Grey to earn her redemption, Jim Shooter, the editor, demanded otherwise: Jean Grey had to die. When it was suggested later that the character of Jean Grey could profitably be used in another X-men line of

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effect, see also Martyn Pedler, "The Fastest Man Alive: Stasis and Speed in Contemporary Superhero Comics," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2009), 249-263.

[8] Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern,* 38-48.

comics, Grey was brought back. Her story-line was retconned to establish that she had never killed anyone. The Phoenix Force had put Grey into a state of suspended animation at the bottom of the ocean, and had then used a duplicate body of Grey for its actions.

While serial continuity is generally the form of continuity that receives the most attention, Reynolds identifies two other forms as well. Hierarchical continuity largely refers to the power levels of the various characters:

> At its most straightforward, hierarchical continuity implies that if superhero A defeats supervillain B in one comic and superhero C is defeated by supervillain B in another comic, then (assuming no other changes in superhero continuity …) superhero A is stronger than superhero C and should be able to defeat him in a head-to-head contest.[9]

Finally, structural continuity is similar to serial continuity but is expanded to include an entire universe of comic book titles as those from Marvel or DC Comics. For example, if Superman is depicted as floating unconsciously in space for several months, he cannot also appear in the Justice League comics at the same time without some sort of explanation.

This need for continuity is itself a development within comics that occurred in the 1960s as a result of a series of editorial decisions. Stan Lee's desire to provide a more integrated universe throughout the Marvel comic line shifted superhero comics away from an emphasis on individual issue stories or short, self-contained arcs and towards a more integrated universe of superheroes with ongoing conflicts and relationships. This was by no means a 'natural' progression, as superhero comics had functioned fine without such an integrated approach for the previous 20 years. By encouraging an awareness of continuity, and even creating a "No Prize" for those readers who spotted continuity errors,[10] Lee fostered a perception of the continuous, connected nature of the Marvel universe, which DC Comics soon emulated. This created an added level of involvement on the part of the reader, but also created in the reader the *expectation* of serial, hierarchical and structural continuities in the narratives – not only did superheroes live in a world like ours, but time passed and was given a structure similar to ours as

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[9] Ibid., 40.

[10] The "No-Prize" was first instituted by Lee, and in its most famous iteration involved fans writing in to Marvel Comics to point out continuity errors within the comics, but also why they were not in fact continuity errors. The recipient would receive an envelope from Marvel in the mail containing nothing but the envelope: fitting as they had won a "No-Prize".

well. Now one could begin to speak of a history of a particular superhero, even if assigning a precise chronology to events was still difficult. Implicated now in a form of history, as are real humans, superheroes began to have a narrative identity of their own that stretched beyond individual stories by individual creative teams of authors and artists.

It is in this context that we can fruitfully speak of superheroes, not as divorced from their creators, but as having an internal consistency stretching beyond them. We can speak of Morrison's X-men, or Claremont's X-men to refer to particular artistic visions, but we can also speak of *the* X-men and trace their development over time as a continuous entity. In this context, Paul Ricoeur's work on identity can be usefully applied. For Ricoeur, a key problem in the question of identity rests on the need to connect two different but related aspects of the individual. On one level, we speak of identity as a marker for an individual person. When we speak of a particular person we are usually referring to a unique individual, bound by certain physical characteristics and mental traits. This is *idem*-identity, or identity as sameness, as the same, identifiable person who is recognizable over time even with minor variations in appearance.[11] This form of identity provides the answer to the question of "what" in regards to the person, but not the question of "who" that bespeaks an acting agent. The *ipse*-identity, as Ricoeur calls it, is connected to the idea of the self rather than sameness, and is best understood as the agent that makes the promise to accomplish a future action. It is the ethical agent that can say "Here I am" that goes beyond a physical claim, to the core of the self.[12]

An example might aid in understanding. Maxwell Lord, an arch-villain, develops the power to transfer minds. Lord transfers his mind into Lex Luthor's, and uses Luthor to kill someone. Several years later, a witness finally gathers the courage to come forward and names Luthor as the murderer. All of the evidence is conclusive, and Luthor is charged with murder. At this point in time, the traumatic event of killing another against his conscious will has caused Luthor to turn away from evil and use his resources for good. The question is not only who is responsible, but also how they are responsible, and how to articulate the various levels of that responsibility. At one level we can say that Luthor is responsible. To an outside observer, Luthor was the one who killed the man: it was his body that committed the act, and certain

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[11] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*. Trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), esp. 116-118.
[12] Ibid., 167-168.

personality traits of Luthor that were on full display served to underscore the conclusion that this individual was the killer. As it is impossible to prove or disprove Luthor's claim he was mentally controlled, it is difficult to accept the observation that his outward form did not correspond to his inward self. On the other hand, it seems problematic to ascribe the agency of the act to Luthor: he was not the one acting, or at the very least he was not him*self* when he committed the murder. A third level, however, is added when we attempt to ascertain if it was *same* Luthor who committed the crime as he is today, a Luthor that has changed his ways and become a model, repentant citizen. This third level introduces a third element in Ricoeur's understanding of identity that attempts to link same and self together into one person. This is part of Ricoeur's attempt to answer the question of how to ascribe past actions to an agent; how do we deal with the concordance and discordance of attributing past action to an agent oriented to the future?[13] For Ricoeur, the answer is through narrative identity: "A triad has thus imposed itself on my analysis: describe, narrate, prescribe – each moment of the triad implying a specific relation between the constitution of action and the constitution of the self."[14] In recognizing and narrating to oneself the story of one's experiences (the what of idem-identity's actions) as a person, "understood as a character in a story," a dynamic identity is opened up that allows for a continual re-narration of life-events in the context of the changing commitments of the self.[15]

In terms of the superhero genre, we can then address the 'historical' development of Superman and the X-men, for instance, through an awareness of the idea of identity. The iconic costume, as well as general personality traits, catchphrases, and mottos signify identity as sameness and function at the surface level to identify the character through time. While Superman's costume changes, the iconic 'S' and even general shape and appearance of his costume and cape remain the same. This helps to give continuity to the image in the monthly comic book. Even the general traits of being an alien, having adoptive human parents, and trying to uphold the principles of "truth, justice, and the American way," all help to identify Superman as *the* Superman through time and various reiterations of the character.[16] However, in contrast to

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[13] Ibid., 147.
[14] Ibid., 114-115.
[15] Ibid., 147-148.
[16] This does not necessarily mean that he is the *same* Superman, as *Crises on Infinite Worlds* and other attempts to reinvent the character suggest, but rather each incarnation is perceived as *the* Superman – as *the* unique individual that alone properly wears the mantle and expectation of Superman.

Ricoeur's triad, where narrative identity is held in tension by the descriptive and prescriptive dimension of the person, here it is the narrative identity that we see on a monthly basis. For the reader, and especially for those seeking to examine culture in the context of the superhero genre, it is precisely the prescriptive content of the character that remains to be uncovered. How Superman is then constructed and actualized through the narrative, informs the conception of how Superman *ought* to be, which illuminates precisely the *ought* that connects us to culture. Superman changes over time much less in his *idem*-identity then in the construction of his self as a result of societal pressures and concerns.

In examining the changing dynamic of the self seen in the narratives of the superhero genre, we can identify and trace various tensions and cross-pressures within society, some of which Taylor identifies within *A Secular Age*. When combined with the narrative nature of the form, we have a resource to examine how these tensions and cross-pressures are reconciled into the self into new frames of experience. One example of this can be found in the changing role and perception of violence within society. For instance, in regards to the question of violence, it is interesting to note the near obsession over the question of killing articulated in the X-men of the 1970s and early 80s. In virtually every issue, one of the X-men – usually the African, weather-controlling Storm, or Russian Colossus, who is capable of turning into organic steel – has an internal debate regarding the ethics of killing an enemy, even in self-defence. When both Storm and Colossus separately are forced to break this vow, there are serious repercussions. Storm begins to lose control over her powers, committed through the Goddess as she is to the protection of all life, as well as her innate connection to all living things. The powers of the Goddess flow through her, so she perceives herself as manifesting the Goddess in important ways. In order to regain her powers, she must internalize that she is not the Goddess but rather a human, but then also capable of a making a wider range of ethical choices.[17] The challenge for Colossus is somewhat different. After being depicted in various issues as trying to reconcile the requirement to preserve life with what to do in the face of foes that have no such compunction, Colossus finally resolves to kill in order to save another person's life.[18] The mere attempt to kill,

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[17] Chris Claremont (w), Marc Silvestri (p), "Go Tell the Spartans." *Uncanny X-men* Vol.1 #226 (Feb. 1988), Part 2 [of 9], "Fall of the Mutants." (Jan.-Mar 1988) Marvel Comics.
[18] Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (p), "The Action of the Tiger." *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #128 (Dec. 1979), Part 3 [of 30], "Proteus." (Oct.-Dec. 1979), Marvel Comics; and Claremont (w) , Byrne (p), "God Spare the Child …" *Uncanny X-men* v. 1 #129 (Jan. 1980), Marvel Comics.

despite being unsuccessful, causes him to descend into despair. He can only rouse himself out of his despair through a 'boy's night out' with Wolverine and Nightcrawler, involving too much alcohol and a super-bar brawl.[19] These tensions, albeit wrapped up with other narrative aspects, take over 4 years to develop.

However, two years later in the narrative arc of the story, things are very different. We find Colossus snapping a foes neck with nary any sign of long-term moral conflict.[20] This act of violence is significant for other reasons as well. The year 1986 marked the publication of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Watchmen*, part of a turn to a grittier version of superheroes which the "Morlock Massacre" – where Colossus snaps his foe's neck – is a clear part. The "Morlock Massacre" storyline within X-men comics significantly changed the moral landscape of the X-men. Drawn out over 11 issues across 5 comic lines, the "Morlock Massacre" saw the wholesale genocide of a disadvantaged community of mutants at the hands of psychotic hired killers. While Jean Grey as the Phoenix wiped out a planet with billions of lives, all of it was conveyed in abstract terms and from a distance. Not so here, where the entire story arc seemed to be played for emotional manipulation and boundary pushing. Unlike other arcs where loss of life might have been suggested as an unintended consequence of the pursuit of other aims, here the aim *is* the massacre of the Morlocks – there is no other purpose. The Brood, who had served as a way to explore the ethics of killing in the early 1980s, were portrayed as insectoid aliens.[21] The Marauders – the name of the group of killers – were made up of mutants, humans, and cyborgs. With this story arc the moral message of the X-men changed. Until that point, the members of the team tried to find ways not to kill, and when it did happen it marked a failure and generated moral angst. Afterwards, killing was accepted as a necessary tool in handling violent villains. The moral motto seemed to become: do unto others as they would do to you.

The critical issue that occupied so much time in the 1980s is largely ignored by the 90s. Or rather, freed from the societal expectation of the strictly controlled place of violence in the

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[19] Claremont (w), John Romita Jr. (p), "He'll Never Make Me Cry," *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #183 (July 1984), Marvel Comics.
[20] Claremont (w), John Romita Jr. and Bret Blevins (p), "Massacre," *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #211 (Nov. 1986), Part 3 [of 11], "Mutant Massacre" (Oct. 1986-Jan. 1987), Marvel Comics.
[21] E.g.: Claremont (w), Dave Cockrum (p), "Beyond the Farthest Star," *Uncanny X-Men* Vol. 1 #162 (Oct 1982), Marvel Comics.

world of the superhero,[22] the X-men (and the genre itself) were free to explode the boundaries of violence: killing, while still having moral weight, was little mourned. This trend was such that when *Ultimate X-men* was created in 2001 as an updated version of the team for modern sensibilities, within a year of publication an X-men was forced to kill a morally ambiguous character. The moral repercussions, the moral angst, lasted all of 1 issue.[23] The expected role of violence when dealing with perceived enemies, the assumed 'conditions of lived experience,' were substantially different than in the superhero world of the 1980s.

The sheer scope of narrative material when examined longitudinally over time is also a great asset when looking at questions of cultural construction, which is a central part of Taylor's own project in *A Secular Age*. Questions of violence and sexuality are addressed within comics, along with changing societal expectations, but also the tensions and dilemmas that went along with those changing expectations. An array of critical issues arise: disenchantment and the heroic, the place of minorities within society, transhumanism, questions of immigration, identity, and the conception of the nature and relation of science, spirituality and mysticism. All of these issues and more are explored not just in the genre as a whole, but even just within X-men comics alone.[24] The majority of studies regarding superheroes have been focused on specific concerns or specific storylines, significantly narrowing and confining their historical scope. Longitudinal studies focusing on changing cultural perceptions of important societal concepts and mythic constructs have rarely been attempted using this genre, but there does appear ample room for such an approach.[25]

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[22] By the 1990s, as well, the need to adhere to the Comics Code Authority which had mandated a highly censored view of violence, sexuality, and the presentation of good and evil, had largely disappeared as a force upon the comic industry. See Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

[23] Mark Millar (w), Tony Raney (p), "No Safe Haven," *Ultimate X-men* Vol. 1 #9 (October 2001), Marvel Comics.

[24] Given the element of time, variation *within* creative teams can also be noted. From 1975 to 1991 Chris Claremont was the writer of the X-men, penning many of their best-known stories. He returned to the X-men in 2000-2001, and again in 2004-2006. By looking at how he addresses issues of violence and religion, for example, we can note changing perceptions within his work.

[25] E.g.: Ben Saunders, *Do the Gods Wear Capes?: Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes* (New York: Continuum, 2011), while otherwise a very useful study, confines his approach to set time periods with limited connections *through* time. A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer, eds., *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (New York: Continuum, 2010), as an anthology, perpetuates this same trend, with the various authors focusing on particular moments in particular storylines to make their points, rather than attempting to link narrative implications together, or even looking at a comic book based on perceptions of religion *over* a long stretch of time. Many studies on the superhero genre confine their focus to a particular period and make arguments based upon a careful reading of that moment in the creative process. What interests us here is the cultural change found

Another difficulty faced in superhero scholarship is the structure of how the message from the comic book is formed. On one level is the message and use of symbolic and representational forms by the creative team writing the story. But held in tension with the story is the iconic image the superhero portrays, and which its corporate producers seek to maintain. Superman, Spiderman, Batman are all recognized images which generate a kind of cultural capital, which can then be turned into economic capital.[26] This cultural capital is used by individuals in constructing cultural meaning for themselves and their communities, while also used by companies to generate income. The result, though, is that companies often become fiercely protective of their source of capital, seeking to restrict and control its use. This protection of cultural capital has an added layer of significance as it is closely tied to the history of superhero comics.

The publication of *Action Comics* #1 in 1938, which featured Superman for the first time – the first superhero – quickly became a huge success, selling over half a million copies by the seventh issue.[27] This phenomenal success was quickly emulated by those seeking to eek out a profit during the difficult times of the Great Depression. "Superman literally created the industry," as was later claimed by a DC Comics spokesman.[28] Indeed, in a story that rivals the pulp fictions in print at the time, Victor Fox was the accountant for National Allied Publications who owned Action Comics. Fox regularly saw the sales figures before Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, the owner of National Allied Publications, due to Fox's role as accountant. When Fox saw the initial figures for Superman, he quit his position at National Allied Publications and promptly started a rival company, and *Wonder Man* – a character with powers very similar to Superman's – was rushed into this emerging market. It ran for one issue before being closed down due to copyright infringement. The Superman image became something vital to maintain for commercial reasons, prompting DC to sue anyone perceived to infringe on the rather general

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within a comic series over time, through its interaction with society as well as multiple creative hands. This more longitudinal note can be seen in the recent series by McFarland & Company Inc., Publishing, and edited by Joseph J. Darowski (e.g.: *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, (Jefferson,: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishing, 2012).

[26] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook for Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 47-51.

[27] Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 9.

[28] Ibid., 14.

idea of a super-strong, nearly invulnerable, flying man. This ultimately resulted in the 12 year long court case against Fawcett Comics over the character Captain Marvel.[29] In 1953, the Court ruled in DC's favour, and Fawcett Comics gave over the rights of Captain Marvel to DC Comics. In an industry where imitation was far less a matter of flattery than basic survival, this was an important moment.

As various creative products continued to be published and secured audiences for themselves, the iconic images of these superheroes became more important. The red, blue and yellow of Superman, the grey, yellow and blue of Batman, as well as the 'S' and the image of the bat, become recognizable and almost function as shorthand identifying the characters. But the iconic images were also filled with meaning. Captain America became an instant national icon with his first issue, featuring him punching Hitler in the jaw splashed across the cover. Superman represented truth, justice, and the American way. Billy Batson as Captain Marvel quickly became known and loved as the 'big red cheese' for his blending of childhood innocence, corny dialogue, and superpowers – his was the innocence and will of a super-boy scout. Any attempt by a third party producer to replicate the image of an established figure, threatened to disrupt the connection between icon and meaning generated and marketed to the comic book buying public. It also often resulted in aggressive legal action.

The iconic status of superhero characters also constrained its creators. In 2011 when Superman renounced his American citizenship in *Action Comics* #900 to become a citizen of the world, the backlash was strong, resulting in the issue selling out its first printing, and generating a flood of critical comments when various major news media published the story.[30] This resulted in several months later Superman re-affirming his American identity in *Superman* #711.[31] As

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[29] See Pádraig Ó Méalóid, "Poisoned Chalice, part I: From the Start of Superman to the End of Captain Marvel," *The Beat: the News Blog of Comic Culture*, (February 12, 2013), http://comicsbeat.com/poisoned-chalice-part-1-from-the-start-of-superman-to-the-end-of-captain-marvel/, for a more detailed description of the conflict between the two companies through the courts. It is also interesting to keep in mind that by the early 1940s Captain Marvel was consistently beating Superman in sales, and was the highest circulating comic book character (Paul Douglas Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 12).

[30] Laura Hudson, "The Mainstream Media Totally Freaks out over Superman's Citizenship," Comics Alliance, May 2, 2011, http://comicsalliance.com/superman-us-american-citizenship.

[31] Cf.: Randy Duncan, 'Travelling Hopefully in Search of American National Identity: The "Grounded" Superman as a 21st Century Picaro,' in *The Ages of Supermam: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, 218-230; Andrew Terjesen, "Is Superman an *American* Icon?" in *Superman and Philosophy: What Would the Man of Steel Do?* ed. Mark D. White (New York: Wiley, 2013), 71-82.

the very idea of superheroes rose in commercial force, the two major publishers – DC and Marvel – even joined together to trademark the very word 'superheroes'.[32]

The scholar who wishes to study the superhero genre faces the outcome of some of these cross pressures. Comic books are primarily a visual medium, with the superhero genre dominated by DC Comics and Marvel, but the issue of wanting to protect a character's image – both visually and what they represent – results in considerable difficulties in acquiring the use of those images in scholarly works. If an image is used, there is a licensing fee involved which usually means the work must be geared towards a more popular audience to re-coup such fees, typically decreasing some of the scholarly value. Alternatively, the use of images is simply discouraged or forbidden by editorial mandate.[33] The result is that for the researcher a decision must be made regarding how to approach a visual medium without being able to use the visual nature of the medium to full effect in an individual study. Recent challenges and changes to 'fair use' laws have opened the door slightly, but their long-term impact is yet to be seen.

The difficulty in fully engaging the visual in superhero comics often results – at least in part – in them not being engaged by scholars in a proportionate level to other forms of comics. For independent comics, and those publishers like Image Comics that allow creators to maintain ownership of their creations,[34] it is relatively easy to seek permission to use images in published research. All that is required is to contact the creator and ask permission. As most of those creators maintain web pages or twitter accounts, securing permission is usually an email away. However, independently owned superhero comics represent only a very small percentage of the superhero market - the superhero market itself representing the vast majority of the comic book industry in North America overall.[35] Comics scholarship has also long been wrapped up in questions of worth, with superhero titles often falling on or near the bottom. There are many

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[32] There is currently a court case in New York between Ray Felix, the publisher of a small, independent webcomic called "A World Without Superheroes," and DC and Marvel Comics over the use of the word. See Alex Eidman, "Comic Book Creator Takes on Publishers Marvel and DC for Right to Use Term 'Superhero'," *New York Daily News*, April 25, 2013, http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/comic-book-creator-fights-term-superhero-article-1.1327860.

[33] For instance, McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishing, publishers of several series devoted to superheroes, has an editorial policy to simply not print images in their publication.

[34] This is unlike Marvel and DC Comics who require creators to sign over the rights of their respective creations, thus making them the sole property of the two publishers.

[35] DC and Marvel Comics, whose primary income is the superhero genre, had 65% of the market share for 2013; "Publisher Market Shares: Year 2013," Diamond Comic Distributors, Inc., Accessed January 30, 2014, http://www.diamondcomics.com/Home/1/1/3/237?articleID=143837.

factors that contribute to this image, including the history of the creation of comic book shops themselves.[36] As a result, superhero studies often lag behind in applying a critically developed appreciation and analysis of the sophisticated visual content within the form. There is a need for the ImageText nature of the medium to be more fully developed and integrated within studies of the superhero genre.

Will Eisner's foundational work, both as a writer, artist, and scholar, involved some of the first forays into understanding the workings of the medium. Calling the form "sequential art," he sought to understand the unique visual and textual dynamics of the medium.[37] Drawing upon Eisner's work, but significantly developing it further, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* sought to explore many of the visual dynamics fundamental to the medium in a highly appropriate form – as graphic narrative.[38] McCloud significantly shaped scholarly discourse on the medium through his development of such ideas as the connection between increasing abstraction in representation and the iconic, panel closure and audience involvement, and the particular and peculiar manipulation of time and space within a static form. Much scholarship into comics continues to be defined by McCloud's work, even as it seeks to move beyond his interpretation. David Carrier's *The Aesthetics of Comics* attempted to move beyond a literary or art history approach to understanding comics by examining the medium in the context of philosophy, and especially the field of aesthetics. As an attempt to push into fields not originally associated with comics, Carrier's work is important and useful in generating original research into comics across disciplines. More recently Thierry Groensteen's *Systéme de la bande dessinée*, finally translated into English in 2007 as *The System of Comics*, with its integration of the field of visual analysis and semiotics into the study and understanding of comics, has become one of the dominant theoretical tools for seeking to understand the narrative and visual structures underlying graphic narrative.[39]

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[36] Robert L. Beerbohm, "Secret Origins of the Direct Market, Part 2: Phil Seuling and the Undergrounds Emerge," *Comic Book Artist*, Vol. 7, (February 2000), 116-125.

[37] Will Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 6.

[38] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*; McCloud, for his part, defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberative sequence, meaning to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer." (9)

[39] Graphic narrative, in its fullest sense, refers to any attempt to use graphic images in the construction either in whole or in part. For instance, a picture book is a graphic narrative, as are medieval woodcuts. This is distinct and a wider designation than the particular forms of graphic narrative such as comic books, *bande dessinée*, and manga.

The study of comics is also complicated by the seeming simplicity, transparency and ease by which the genre is read. While there is a need to interpret art, everyone understands comics.[40] However, when probed, the content of that understanding, the act of interpretation, reveals a wealth of polysemic perceptual possibilities; "instead of looking toward the distant model of the artist and his culture, we rather look to ourselves understanding images by analyzing our response to them."[41] Contra McCloud, Douglas Wolk argues against reading comics as literary texts, drawing instead upon the French concept of understanding graphic narrative as the 9th art.[42] However, Charles Hatfield convincingly argues for understanding comics as a literary form, but a particular kind of literary form, as the best way to approach the medium. As Hatfield writes;

> The comics form is infinitely plastic: there is no single recipe for reconciling the various elements of the comics page. … The restless, polysemiotic character of the form allows for the continued rewriting of its grammar; each surrounding page need not function in precisely the same manner as its predecessor. The relationship between the various elements of comics (image, words, symbols, etc.) resists easy formulation. The critical reading of comics therefore invokes a tug-of-war between conflicting impulses: on the one hand, the nigh-on irresistible urge to codify the workings of the form; on the other, a continual delight in the form's ability to frustrate any airtight analytical scheme.[43]

For Hatfield, the most interesting element of comics is their narrative form. Hatfield's work is very usefully translated into a historical approach, which also structures this study. It allows and acknowledges a codification of signs and symbols that can be identified within the genre,[44] while also being mindful of how those forms are broken down and challenged. In this way, it fits well within a cultural approach to media and religion, being aware of the representation of sacred

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Comics and comic books (also referred to by some as comicbooks) refers to the specific style of North American serial graphic storytelling most often – though certainly not solely – connected with the superhero genre.

[40] David Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, 85.

[41] Ibid., 89-90.

[42] Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2007), 14-15.

[43] Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, xiv.

[44] This codification and formulaic establishment of signs and symbols as recurring themes and images within a body of work is what largely makes it fit into a coherent genre in the first place. See, for example, Art Silverblatt, *Genre Studies in Mass Media: A Handbook* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), where he highlights eight elements that typically make up the construction of a genre.

forms, the desire to codify and essentialize those forms, and also the ability for change and challenge to disrupt categorization.

In reality, though, many popular works on the subject of superheroes largely rely upon an essentialist or functionalist analysis of the genre.[45] The argument is often made, for example, that Superman represents a certain symbol, a symbol that remains largely constant across and within culture. Superman, in this way of understanding, is perceived to fit within the mythic archetypes of the strongman and cultural protector – he is Samson, Hercules, Christ, and the Jewish Golem. A problem with such an analysis is that while Superman is read as Christ-like, Jesus is also read as Superman-like, often with little regard for historical, mythological, and religious traditions. In like manner, Hercules becomes more like Superman, along with the various Biblical figures that Superman is based upon as well.[46] In such a reading, though, crucial historical and cultural elements are lost or downplayed. The task of this essentialist reading of superheroes becomes identifying other mythic archetypes, often trying to tie them together with heroic patterns across culture.[47] However, this is only one aspect of the way myth and the superhero genre interacts.

In this regard, there are three general ways that the superhero genre and myth are typically connected. The first is in the way superheroes and superhero stories often deal explicitly with mythical characters such as Thor, Zeus, Asgaard, etc., incorporating them in various ways into their story lines. Second, superheroes are understood to function as modern myth in some way. This claim usually draws either upon the idea of superheroes as representing mythic archetypes – Superman's strength was initially modelled after Hercules and Samson,[48]

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[45] E.g.: Greg Garrett, *Holy Superheroes!: Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Film* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); Jean-Paul Gabilliet, "Cultural and Mythical Aspects of a Superhero: The Silver Surfer 1968-1970," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (1994), 203-213; Robin S. Rosenberg and Jennifer Canzoneri, eds., *The Psychology of Superheroes: An Unauthorized Exploration* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2008), while an edited collection, the essays are based on the assumption of a static, essential identity that is then largely pathologized and treated for discussion.

[46] E.g..: Peter Horsfield, "Gibson's *The Passion*: The Superheroic Body of Jesus," in *Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman*, eds. Wendy Haslem, Angela Ndalianis, and C. J. Mackie (Washington, DC: New Academia Pub., 2007), 167-180; Ken Schenck, "Superman: A Popular Culture Messiah," in *The Gospel According to Superheroes*, 33-48.

[47] Terrence Wandtke sees this attempt at reducing the superhero genre to a study of archetypes as a result of examining superhero comics through the lens of an elite, literate culture, rather than seeing and interpreting comics as part of oral culture; Terrence R. Wandtke, *The Meaning of Superhero Comic Books*, 22-27, though in large measure this argument runs throughout the entire book.

[48] Les Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History, the Life and Times of the Man of Steel* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998), 18.

while Batman evokes the image of a modern Odysseus through the weapon of his mind[49] - or the perspective of culture as the creator of myth. Third, and less important for this study, is the common way of delineating the historical stages of superhero comics: in the beginning was a Golden Age of comics, followed by a Silver Age, a Bronze Age, and even an Iron Age.[50]

The most obvious connection between the superhero genre and myth is that of superhero characters (heroes, villains, and other elements). The use of mythological figures was initially a result of the need for characters that didn't run the risk of copyright infringement. If one had to be careful of creating a super-strong, nigh invulnerable, flying man for the use in a story, or else risk being sued, the use of a super-strong, nigh invulnerable, ancient hero gifted by the gods with the winged sandals of Hermes named Hercules for that same story posed far fewer risks. Superman might be copyrighted, but the mythical figure of Hercules exists solidly within the realm of the public domain.

But there are other valuable elements that are unearthed to be used in these mythical excavations. The Marvel hero Thor is a prime example of the benefit of directly using mythological characters as superheroes or plot elements. The Norse god Thor is not the only god in Norse mythology, but is part of a rich tapestry that includes the entire pantheon of Asgaardian deities, their relationships with one another, and other beings. That same mythology also includes Asgaard itself as home of the gods, and even the entire cosmology of Norse myth. All of which can become a rich body of material to be incorporated into superhero stories. In using the mythical Thor Marvel has a story with a ready-made arch-nemesis in the figure of Loki, the Norse trickster god, as well as a relationship with the complex figure of Odin, his father and leader of the gods. Sif, meanwhile, Thor's wife in Norse myth, can be transformed to serve as a fitting love-interest as needed, or even simply to add extra drama to the story. Even Ragnarok, the final battle of the gods can be used as an apocalyptic threat to add impetus to various storylines.[51] Being understood as 'gods' there is also the need to fit them into a society that is

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[49] C.J. Mackie, "Men of Darkness," in *Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman*, 83-96.

[50] The naming convention is commonly tracked to Richard Lupoff's first coining the phrase "golden age" in 1960 in reference to earlier superhero stories (Bill Schelly, *Founders of Comic Fandom* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishing, 2010), 73). This naming convention, though, has come under greater scrutiny and challenge as it also carries with it suggestions of worth (i.e.: Golden Age is better than Silver Age is better than Iron Age, etc.). While there have been various attempts to offer alternative ways of naming time periods, none have established themselves as a new norm to challenge this convention.

[51] Ragnarok has occurred twice in *Thor* comics: once the Norse prophecy comes true, but is averted by Odin's cunning (Roy Thomas (w), John Buscema (p), Tony Palmer (p), Chic Stone (p), *Thor: Ragnarok* [collecting *Thor*

fractured in terms of belief – are they 'gods', or just powerful, technologically advanced aliens? What is their relationship to the concept of a monolithic deity, if there even is such a being in the reality of the comic book world?

In this frame, religious figures themselves are also used, explored, and sometimes exploited for what they can add to the superhero universe. The various manifestations of ultimate evil – almost always imagined in Western, Christian imagery[52] – are represented through various characters, with both Marvel and DC staking out a Luciferian counter-part in their respective realities.[53] But this also allows for a plethora of encounters and conflict between various hosts of demons, reformed demons, corrupted angels, and angels. In the DC universe, for example, Supergirl herself, or one incarnation of Supergirl, was presented as the Earth-born Angel of Fire.[54] While another character, Zauriel, was conceived of as a guardian angel and member of the Justice League, who willingly fell to earth to act as a superhero. Another long-time character, one of the most powerful characters in the DC Universe, is described as the Angel of God's Wrath. In the popular *The Ninety-Nine*, a conscious attempt to blend Islam and superheroes, 99 adults and teenagers are granted the ability to manifest one of the 99 names of God that are part of the Islamic tradition. On the other side, there are also a plethora of demons and reformed demons that occupy various roles throughout their respective universes.[55]

Even God has been used as a figure evoking certain mythological usage. In Garth Innis's controversial series, *Preacher*, the central premise is that God has taken a break from being God and disappeared, leaving the celestial bureaucracy in charge. A small town, disillusioned preacher named Jesse Custer is possessed by a child-like half-angel/half-demon entity, and decides to go looking for God in order to call Him to account. Ultimately, the series depicts God being killed by the "Saint of Killers," answering the question if God has the power to create

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Vol. 1 #272-278] (June-Dec 1978), Marvel Comics.), while the second, more recent Ragnarok resulted in the destruction of Asgaard by Loki (Michael Oeming (w), Andrea Di Vito (p), *Avengers Disassembled: Thor*, Ed. by Tom Brevoort (New York: Marvel Comics, 2006). Thor was later to rebuild Asgaard, thus allowing for the possibility for Ragnarok to occur again.

[52] It is perhaps interesting in this connection that both images and references relating to ultimate transcendence in forms similar to Western notions of God are very rare and vague within both Marvel and DC universes. Images and conceptions of an ultimate evil are far more prevalent and accepted, however.

[53] In the Marvel Universe the figure of Mephisto often serves in this role, though careful comic book readers would emphasize that Mephisto merely *impersonates* Satan in the Marvel Universe. While in the DC Universe, especially that of Superman, Satanus fills this function of representing Satan.

[54] Peter David (w), Leonard Kirk (p), "Comet's Tale," *Supergirl* Vol. 4 #22 (June 1998), DC Comics.

[55] E.g.: Hellboy, Blue Devil, Spawn, Satana, to name only a few.

someone who can kill anyone, does that also include God? In a story arc at the turn of the millennium, the ultra-violent comic *The Authority* pitted the titular group against God, or at least an entity that might as well have been called God according to the heroes, due to the entity's sheer power and size.[56] In short, not just angels and demons serve as myth-like characters in comic book stories, but God as well.[57]

The use of these mythic characters can also be seen to function within the same grounds as identified by Ricoeur. As mythic figures there is the ability to identify and recognize them as part of a wider cultural heritage. The Thor of the Marvel universe is recognized as being in certain regards the same as the Thor of Norse myth The precise content of this 'sameness' is open to debate, but there is enough overlap to be recognizable. The strength, Viking appearance, and unique connection to the hammer Mjolnar, all identify *what* he is – he is Thor. But the melding and incorporation of particular qualities of the character into who Thor is as a self, underscores and reflects the particular cultural concerns of those using the image. What becomes important is identifying and understanding these variations and where they open up and reveal ongoing cultural constructions

Another example is that of hell. At the same time that the idea of hell has decreased in the academic imagination, it is hard to make the same claim for the popular imagination where versions of hell have proliferated across mediums and multiple genres. Yet, whereas before it was standard to talk of hell in the singular, in many expressions of contemporary media it is much more prevalent to speak of hells, or hell dimensions. The image of the threat of punishment, pain, and ultimate hopelessness is still there, but shifting the language and conception of hell to that of hell *dimensions* also shifts the concept away from a reliance on Christian tradition. Earth, in such an understanding, occupies a plane in only one dimension within the universe. But if that is the case, what is to say that there is not an infinite number of hell-like dimensions that follow their own internal, physical and metaphysical laws while still

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[56] Warren Ellis (w), Bryan Hitch (p), "The Outer Dark," *The Authority* Vol. 1 #9-12 (January-April 2000), Wildstorm Comics. In this story arc, the heroes learn that earth is not actually theirs, but that humans are rather squatters on it. The Creator of the Earth is coming home and wants to wipe out the human virus that has infected it. In this regard, it is interesting to note that creatures associated with God are nearly always defined in terms of their omnipotence, and not other qualities.

[57] This idea of God-as-character can be seen as a continuation of the Bible-as-literature way of viewing the Bible, with God being analyzed and understood as a character within a book-like narrative. See especially, Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995)

operating within an immanent frame? The question of the cultural purpose of the redefinition of mythic symbols and characters, as well as the history of these redefinitions, provides fruitful academic terrain for understanding the lived conditions of the modern self.

The second connection between superheroes and myth revolves around issues of analysis and interpretation. This element draws upon the idea that myth or mythic archetypes somehow relate and structure the superhero genre itself. The idea of Batman as Odysseus draws upon the idea that there is a particular archetype within stories and myth that link certain characters through time and culture. This first approach to analysis and interpretation often rests upon Jungian notions of a collective unconscious as the source of myth. In such approaches there is an appeal to mythic structures that transcend individual culture, suggesting an ontological, static root for these heroic figures and myths which they inhabit.[58] In this frame Batman could just as easily be understood as representing the African Spider god Anansi, or one of a number of Native American Trickster figures, as well as Occidental mythic heroes like Odysseus. What is important is that Batman uses his brain and intellect in order to solve problems, 'just like' the mythic trickster figure. There is also a second way of approaching the analysis and use of superheroes and myth that has also helped shape perceptions of their connections. This approach, borrowing from semiotics, sees myth fundamentally as a communicative act shaped by culture and history. Indeed, a crucial feature of this conception of myth is that it continually tries to slip away from its cultural and historical underpinnings to appear as 'natural': Superman is an archetype inherent across time and culture, but when examined more closely, that archetype looks a lot like our own cultural expectations. Both of these two approaches will be examined in turn.

Superheroes (and villains) as representing archetypes of mythic ideas is readily seen in academic literature, often focusing on the idea of the hero conceptualized by Joseph Campbell. Campbell's influential study, *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), is used and cited frequently within the literature on superheroes. Campbell acknowledges that his work is heavily indebted

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[58] E.g.: Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes* (San Francisco.: Weiser Books, 2007); Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* (New York: Continuum, 2004); such approaches to the superhero genre usually rely heavily on Joseph Campbell's work on myth, especially his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

to the psychoanalysis of Freud and Jung.[59] In *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he claims that his search through the world's heroic literature across cultures reveals a general or essential heroic pattern. This heroic pattern constitutes what Campbell calls a basic monomyth; "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."[60]

While not all stories have precisely the same characteristics, or emphases, they all follow the basic pattern of departure, initiation and return. In regards to the superhero genre, this pattern has been applied particularly well to account for various origin stories. For instance, in the case of Superman, Superman is sent away from his home planet as a baby (departure). He arrives on earth and is adopted by the Kents, and grows up in Smallville, Kansas. As he grows up, he realizes there is something that sets him apart from others, and so eventually decides to leave Smallville to find his place in the world (departure again). Out in the world he is tested, and finds his strength in helping others, and his moral character calling him into a life of doing the same (initiation). He returns to normal life with a special knowledge that he is then able to bring to the community, helping it to grow and flourish (return). Many such origin stories in the superhero genre appear to follow a similar pattern, which has made Campbell's monomyth a major methodological tool for understanding the superhero, despite some severe shortcomings.

One of the chief shortcomings is that Campbell's work can easily be used to reinforce an essentialist, ontological conception of myth and mythic heroes. This would seem to be a misreading of Campbell's argument. While there is much in Campbell's work that would lead one to conclude he is appealing to a collective unconscious unifying all cultures, Campbell seems to skirt such claims himself. While he does make such sweeping statements as "All these different mythologies give us the same essential quest,"[61] which would seem to suggest a fundamental character to all hero myth, Campbell never goes quite that far himself. In the above quote, Campbell is stating a descriptive observation of his analysis of heroic stories across cultures, but he shies away from making a prescriptive statement: this is what I have observed from the past, but that doesn't mean all hero stories for all time must or will follow this same

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[59] E.g.: Joseph Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 4, 237, 354.
[60] Ibid., 28.
[61] Joseph Campbell and Moyers Bill D., *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 129.

pattern. Here Campbell is acknowledging an important caveat for his work that opens up the possibility for further development in the very concept of 'hero' within the modern context.

Roland Barthes, in his *Mythologies* (1957), offers a very different reading of 'myth' based upon a semiotic approach. Barthes understands myth within this semiotic reading as a particular type of speech; "Of course, it is not *any* type: language needs special conditions in order to become myth: we shall see them in a minute. But what must be firmly established at the start is that myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form."[62] At the heart of this form of speech is that myth is a second-order semiological system.[63] What that means for Barthes is that myth as a form is built upon a signifier that is taken as sign; the sign is converted from its historical, cultural construction to appear as part of nature. The word "Rolls-Royce," for example, is used to denote either a particular car, or a line of cars bearing that particular name. However, when we use the term "Rolls-Royce" we also associate certain other connotations with the word beyond the denotation "this particular car bearing the name." The sign "Rolls-Royce" also has attached to it certain connotations of luxury, style, and a whole privileged way of life. If an advertisement for shoes includes an image of a person stepping out of a Rolls-Royce, it functions by "not only denoting the shoes and a car, but attaching the connotations of luxury which are available through the sign 'Rolls-Royce' to the shoes, suggesting a mythic meaning in which the shoes are part of a privileged way of life."[64] The entire system of signs and meanings here is shifted away from "Rolls-Royce-as-car" and "shoe-as-footwear," to one based on the second order semiological system "Rolls-Royce-as-a-certain-kind-of-living". During the process, a considerable amount of energy is spent obscuring and making natural certain conceptions of luxury and way of life.

For Barthes, this bringing together of certain signs and connotations to form a particular message is the process of myth-making. However, as it is a particular bringing together of signs, it is always rooted in culture and history, operating with particular motivations: "Motivation is necessary in the very duplicity of myth: myth plays on the analogy between meaning and form,

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[62] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 109.
[63] Ibid., 114-115.
[64] Jonathan Bignell, *Media Semiotics: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 16.

there is no myth without motivated form."[65] The use of 'duplicity' here might be misleading, as it is used not to invoke a deliberate misleading on the part of a particular individual, but within the form itself. The reason for the language is that for Barthes the creation of myth is linked to cultural and historical forms being essentialized to appear as part of the natural order of things; "We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature. … what causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but as a reason."[66] This concept of myth and culture – that an individual might not be thinking he is creating myth, but rather stating the natural – relates in intriguing ways to perspectives developed by Taylor and Lynch that were explored in chapter 2. Barthes's idea of myth, Taylor's moral sources, and Lynch's sacred forms all seek to explore and make more explicit what we take as natural, and its secret relation to culture.

Umberto Eco's "The Myth of Superman" (1972) employs Barthes semiotic approach and applies it to the figure of Superman. Eco notes timelessness as a particular element of myth. Hercules, Odysseus, Samson and others have a timelessness to their stories, not in that they represent particular archetypes, but that their stories are complete – we know how they begin, progress, and end. The stories are set sometime in the distant past that cannot be precisely dated, and so located outside of time. There is no use imagining Hercules making peace with Hera, marrying Megara, living happily ever after, and dying of old age. While someone can make a story to that effect, as Disney did, we know it as an invention and not part of the actual myth, which allows it to remain available for other adaptations. This is not the case with Superman, who has monthly adventures that are set within our own time, and which will ultimately end when he dies. Superman is not timeless if we can see Superman progressing through time. If he progresses and develops over time, he is not myth; Superman is perceived as a culturally embedded character, rather than as acting in a way that is natural and mythic. What are needed, Eco notes, are strategies by which this apparent movement through time keeps the appearance of development, while also operating outside of time and within a mythic dimension; "Superman comes off as a myth only if the reader losses control of the temporal relationships and renounces the need to reason on their basis, thereby giving himself up to the controllable flux of the stories which are accessible to him and at the same time, holding on to the illusion of a continuous

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[65] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 126.
[66] Ibid., 129.

present."[67] Eco refers to the flux within the story as the oneiric dimension of time.[68] An example here might be in order.

In 1996, Superman finally married his long-time love interest Lois Lane. It would appear that this is a clear example of Superman working within time, that the character is developing and changing. This would seem to suggest that either Superman is not myth, or that Eco is wrong about myth, but a closer examination makes the issue less clear. It seems fairly obvious that Superman's marriage does function within time: it is part of a character's progression, it marks time; it is one step closer to death and the end of the story. Yet, the question can legitimately be asked, what has substantively changed? Marriage does not mark an increased domesticity for Superman, nor does it mark an end of tension within the Lois Lane-Superman relationship, but rather intensifies it: now instead of Lois Lane, girlfriend, it is Lois Lane, wife, that Superman must negotiate the desire to protect, with an acknowledgement of her need to live with the consequences of her choices. Villains do not change: they still seek ways in which to capture Lois, and there is still the need to find ways for her to escape. Even Superman's responses to her being kidnapped do not significantly change, nor the threat that she will be kidnapped. So the question can be asked, what substantively changes? In what way is time marked? It is also useful here to note that it is not Superman, in reality, that marries Lois Lane, but Clark Kent. This is an important caveat. According to Eco, the dual persona of Clark Kent/Superman allows for average people to identify with Clark, while dreaming "that one day, from the slough of his actual personality, a superman can spring forth who is capable of redeeming years of mediocre existence."[69] As Eco's essay is titled "The Myth of Superman" it is interesting to note, that it is Clark Kent's status that legally changes, marking and implicating him within time, not Superman.[70]

The use of the above example was a deliberate one, as it is often used by critics as a chief example of where Eco is wrong in his analysis of Superman.[71] Writing in 1972, Eco himself

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[67] Umberto Eco, "The Myth of Superman," 19.
[68] Ibid., 16.
[69] Ibid., 15.
[70] In this regards, it is interesting to note the physical difference of a notably aged and older Clark Kent versus Superman's return as heroic icon within the graphic novel *Kingdom Come.*
[71] Angela Ndalianis, "'Enter the Aleph": Superhero worlds and hypertime realities,' in *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*, ed. Angelia. Ndalianis (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 270–90; see also, Marc Singer, "The Myth of Eco: Cultural Populism and Comics Studies," *Studies in Comics*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2013), for a criticism of

claims that Superman will never be married precisely because it would implicate him within time.[72] It is sometimes also claimed that Eco was speaking for the Superman he knew, but that it does not account for the particularities of ongoing continuity. This very notion of continuity would seem to place him within time, questioning the "timelessness" of myth as Eco presents it. But then the follow up question can be asked: when exactly did Superman get married? Was it 1996, the chronological date when the comic book issue chronicling the event came out, or was it last month, a year, or two years ago, etc., from the point of view of determining time *within* the story? Does Superman's marriage represent a milestone that sets him firmly within time, or rather involves him in further myths constructed on family and community?[73] Eco's main focus by connecting Superman with myth, following from Barthes, does not seem to posit an unchanging Superman, but to reveal the energy involved in making historical and cultural constructions appear as natural, as timeless myth. As Eco states; "The analysis of temporal structures in Superman has offered us the image of a *way of telling stories* which would seem to be fundamentally tied to pedagogic principles that govern that type of society."[74] (italics in original) Superman upholds truth, justice, and the American way, as he always has. That is the myth. But what that obscures is the way truth, justice, and the American way has changed culturally and historically.

Richard Reynolds, in his *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (1994), brings together elements of Eco's reading of Superman with Campbell's notion of the hero.
Drawing upon Campbell's work, Reynolds identifies 7 components that define the superhero genre:

1) the hero is marked out from society, usually through the loss of his parents;
2) many superheroes have levels of god-like power;
3) the hero's devotion to justice is greater than that of society's laws;
4) the extraordinary nature of the superhero is contrasted in some way with his ordinary surroundings;

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such approaches that too easily dismiss Eco's work, suggesting there is far more to Eco's idea of the superheroes oneiric quality than is sometimes considered.
[72] Eco, "Myth of Superman," 18.
[73] It is interesting to note that within the new continuity of the Superman line that began in 2011, Superman is no longer married.
[74] Ibid., 20.

5) a distinction and separation will be made between the superhero and its alter-ego;
6) related to 3, while above the law, the hero can be deeply connected to country and law enforcement;
7) science functions in the nature of magic in the stories.[75]

While Reynolds work almost immediately met with some critical reception from the academic community,[76] it has exerted significant influence as it was the first full-length, academic monograph that attempted to understand the superhero genre. As Mark David Nevins and others have pointed out over the years, one of Reynolds chief weaknesses is his attempt to essentialize the superhero genre, a genre which includes a huge variety of superheroes both past and present.[77] Each of those seven definitions, at one point or another, have been violated by various superheroes, or are too broad to serve as part of a definition. As with Campbell, Reynolds seems to be trying to articulate general rules regarding modern heroes, but unlike Campbell, whose focus is on ancient myth, the modern superhero is too well-known and evolving to fit easy categorization.

The purpose of the categorization for Reynolds, though, is as a starting point in order to look at superheroes as the American cultural myth. Taking Eco's idea of the timelessness of myths and their connection with the superhero, Reynolds locates that timelessness in certain forms of continuity within the genre rather than in major events in superhero lives;

> New canonical texts are being added every month. Any definitive metatextual resolution is therefore indefinitely postponed. That is to say, the DC or Marvel universe is not finally defined until some future date when superhero texts cease to be published. In the meantime, new texts must be made sense of within continuity, or discarded as non-canonical.[78]

Unlike Eco, Reynolds imposes the idea of myth upon the entire universe of comics and superheroes that DC and Marvel produce: it is *the superhero genre*, rather than any one superhero, which is the form and content of the myth. Looked at this way, the entire genre

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[75] Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, 7-25.
[76] Christian L. Pyle, "The Superhero meets the cultural critic," *Postmodern Culture*, Vol. 5, No 1 (Sept 1994), http://muse.jhu.edu.proxy2.library.mcgill.ca/journals/postmodern_culture/v005/5.1r_pyle.html.
[77] Mark David Nevins. "Mythology and Superheroes." [Review essay.] *Inks: Cartoon and Comic Art Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (November 1996), 24-30.
[78] Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, 43.

becomes a forum for the creation of myth. However, drawing upon Eco's idea of Superman connected to capitalist virtues,[79] the superhero genre in general is taken to be essentially conservative and focused on maintaining the status quo of American society. It becomes not just myth, but an ideological myth.[80] For Reynolds, "The superhero by his very existence asserts American utopianism, which remains a highly potent cultural myth."[81] While Reynolds acknowledges the ability of writers to work around this myth to make calculated statements regarding culture, by essentializing the entire genre to affirm this ideological point, Reynolds obscures as much as he reveals. The content of American utopianism, itself, becomes naturalized, the particular, changing cultural and historical concerns disappearing within the illusion of the static myth.[82]

Drawing upon Reynolds and Campbell's work, and concerns about the connections between ideology and myth, Jewett and Lawrence also develop this argument for the integral relationship between American hero myths and conservative ideologies. Their *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002) did not focus solely on superheroes but the general characteristics of the American action hero.[83] In their study they flesh out what they call the American monomyth. They describe the basic structure of this myth in these terms;

> A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptation and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to it paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity.[84]

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[79] Eco, "Myth of Superman," 22; for Eco, Superman's concept of virtue is based upon the concept of charity, which emphasizes small scale action, while resisting calls for larger-scale social change. As a result, according the Eco, the biggest evil in Superman is the destruction of private property.
[80] Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, 74.
[81] Ibid., 83.
[82] This Barthesian naturalizing of cultural also allows for real ideological concerns and developments within culture to be obscured, as the natural myth takes precedence over cultural and historical development.
[83] Jewett had previously written about the superhero in the context of American identity and the Vietnam War in *The Captain America Complex: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism*. They continued their attack on the theme of the superhero as emblem of dysfunctional nationalism in Robert Lawrence and John Shelton Jewett, *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003).
[84] Robert Lawrence and John Shelton Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 6.

For Jewett and Lawrence, the monomyth conceals several deep ideological issues. As Bernard Scott notes, one of the main issues is the glorification of violence through an emphasis on its role as a 'purifying' element, but also one whereby violence is not imputed to the community. In such a way the community is left pure and innocent, while the saviour hero himself is chaste, and perfectly moral, even if often marked by a questionable background; "This conflict is resolved by having a purified saviour destroy the enemy. Our villain must be morally evil so that we may be morally pure and our violence justified."[85] However, as with Reynolds, the problem is that such a construction attempts to stop cultural development, or at least awareness of it at a particular moment in time; "The American monomyth character described by Lawrence and Jewett is the prototype for many of our pop-culture heroes, particularly superheroes, but often it is only that: the prototype."[86] The reliance upon a static, essentialist, ideologically driven mythic archetype, fails to account for historical developments, and the ways American myth itself has developed in relation to culture. This naturalizing of myth, making what is cultural appear to be essential and mythic, is precisely what Barthes identified and critiqued in his argument.

More recently there has been serious challenge to the traditional view of superheroes as myth, or at least a certain kind of myth. Sean Carney, in "The Function of the Superhero at the Present Time," has argued that, with the turn to more 'realistic' superheroes as a result of *Watchman* and *The Dark Knight Returns*, the study of superheroes requires an awareness of superheroes in regards to their social symbols and thus how they function as history. For Carney, the conscious turn to realism means a greater consciousness on the part of creators of interacting with the social concerns and symbols within the genre. By asking what the social function of the superhero is revisionist comics move superheroes out of a simple ideological orientation; "from its origin as ideological myth, as popular symbols of closed, ideological consciousness, the superhero has been re-inscribed with a hopeful ambivalence which transfers it into a symptom of history."[87] Carney uses such comics as *Marvels* and *Planetary* as self-consciously created attempts of re-examining the implicit ideological assumptions within the

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[85] Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 53.
[86] Jeffrey S. Lang and Patrick Trimble, "Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow? An Examination of the American Monomyth and the Comic Book Superhero," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (1988), 170.
[87] Sean Carney, "The Function of the Superhero at the Present Time," *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6 (2005), 101.

genre, thus showing ways in which comics function beyond a straightforward mythological orientation.

Terrence R. Wandtke pushes this idea of comics and myths even further, challenging it not so much on the idea of comics as myth but as a certain presumption on the part of academics. In *The Meaning of Superhero Comic Books* (2012), Wandtke borrows heavily from Walter Ong and his study of orality to posit comics as more properly belonging to oral traditions rather than literature – as belonging better as oral epic than cosmological, literate, historical myth. Wandtke points to the industrial expectations of speed and constant output that do not fit particularly well our expectations for literature in regards to the creation of superhero comics, but do fit well within the constant development and responsiveness of oral traditions.[88] Indeed, one of the biggest problems for Wandtke is that along with the growing development of superhero comics there has also been an attempt by scholars to legitimize the field. But to legitimize the field, there is a perceived need to emphasize the ways in which the superhero genre and comic books fit with other established disciplines in the academic setting. This has resulted in a reliance upon literary analysis, and a rejection of the disposal nature of the medium, in order to emphasis the 'worth' of comic books.[89] Good literature is something that is preserved, static, and so in order to gain acceptance scholars emphasize the ways in which comics books are artistic, and thus also deserving of being preserved as literature. As a result, the static archetype became the accepted way of understanding the superhero.[90]

Wandtke's argues that the constant ability to revise the superhero in the context of culture, and equally important the ease by which consumers accept this practice, point towards the functioning of an oral rather than a literary cultural phenomenon;

> As opposed to the things held dear by literate cultures (original sources, fixed facts, and the authority of the text), this sort of revisionism is taking us into a socially determined arrangement of information that is much more similar to that of oral cultures; it is oriented toward current development and performance, the interaction of fact and fiction (where fiction is not untruth), and authority as something that is shared and redeveloped by each telling of the story.[91]

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[88] Terrence R. Wandtke, *The Meaning of Superhero Comic Books*, 28-52.
[89] Ibid., 41-42.
[90] Ibid., 23.
[91] Ibid., 13-14.

In the last 30 years the story of Superman's origins have been re-told at least 5 times in comic books, but also retold in television and movies.[92] Beyond that, Wandtke suggestively connects Ong's understanding of oral culture to that of the superhero,[93] with the ultimate outcome that "With the dynamic relationship between the storyteller and story …, storytellers should be recognized as bringing many different elements to their story that represent themselves and their cultural context and therefore necessitate a variety of different modes of analysis to properly describe the superhero story".[94] To be sure Wandtke is not making the case that comics are literally part of an oral culture, but an element of Ong's second orality of the electronic age.[95]

Anthony Mills recent work, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema: The Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of a Genre* (2013), is also part of the recent challenge to rethink the connection between the superhero genre and mythology. Mills does take the stance that the superhero genre is indeed reflective of cultural developments in the creation of American myth. But rather than underlining a presentation of a static conception of Lawrence and Jewett's 'monomyth', he suggests that developments within the superhero genre point to an erosion of a 'traditional' monomyth. Rather than simply pointing to the fact that the early Superman was different than later incarnations, Mills links Eco's argument from "The Myth of Superman" and the development of an American monomyth, with the cultural transition that occurred during the Second World War.[96] Superman from 1938-1941 was a social crusader, mainly concerned with fighting social evils. He was a vigilante. However, as World War II developed, vigilante action and identification of internal economic division within the U.S. become something culturally frowned upon. What was needed was something that brought the community together and enforced social cohesion. Superman, as well as other superheroes, were employed to sell bonds as well as model forms of public behaviour that were more acceptable in wartime, but also implicated the comics in maintaining and encouraging the status quo. It is this version of Superman that Eco identifies as static and timeless, and he was right to do so. However, Eco's

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[92] This focus on origins is also a hallmark of oral cultures according to Wandtke, 38-49.
[93] Ibid., 25, 80-104.
[94] Ibid., 78.
[95] This focus on comics as part of a secondary orality also links comics with the question of the nature of digital mediums; Ibid., 191-207.
[96] Anthony R. Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema: The Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of a Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 25-38.

claims fit well with Barthes's own caution that part of the process of mythmaking is precisely making what is cultural and specific appear natural and timeless. By making the image of Superman and superheroes of the 1950s and 60s as the basis for an American monomyth as Jewett, Lawrence, and Reynolds do, what is cultural and specific is taken as natural, obscuring the ways in which those myths are challenged and developed into more naturalized constructions of myth.

For Mills, the key is the development during the 1960s of Marvel Comics, and especially Stan Lee's influence during this period. Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith refers to the period that stretches from the early 1960s into the 1970s in terms of a search for relevance.[97] For Mills, it is a "turn to reality": "In several places, Lee asserts that above all else the change he wanted to make in superhero stories was to make them more realistic or true to life, notwithstanding, of course, the fictional nature of the genre."[98] The result is a challenge to many of the assumptions of the American monomyth. With their longer, more developed storyline stretching over multiple issues, the oneiric dimension identified by Eco is reduced. Unlike with Superman at the time, "Marvel worked to overcome timelessness and offer a more robust concept of temporality with a definitive past, present, and future."[99] As well, the shift to a focus on the person behind the costume, opened up various other ways in which a static conception of the hero was questioned. As real persons, Marvel heroes had real problems, such as heart issues and alcoholism for Iron Man, blindness for Daredevil, and being a paraplegic for Professor Xavier. These were virtually non-existent in the previous age of comics, and so challenged the perception of virile, perfect hero specimens.

Perhaps most importantly in challenging monomythic expectations was the introduction of seriously flawed superheroes in the Marvel universe, both physically and emotionally. These were vulnerable characters who needed to rely on others, which goes against one of the main

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[97] Randy Smith and Matthew J. Duncan, *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 58-63.

[98] Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema: The Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of a Genre*, 105; to draw attention to Stan Lee is not to minimize the contributions of Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko that worked on the comics with Lee to bring them to life. Indeed, there is a whole discussion of the relative influence of Lee and Kirby on the creation of a particular Marvel style throughout the 1960s that is beyond the purview of this discussion. In speaking of style, Kirby's importance to the genre cannot be overlooked. However, in discussing a certain philosophy that united the Marvel line and brought them together in different ways, Lee's contribution as editor seems paramount (see, Matthew J. Putsz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), 49; Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema*, 103-104.

[99] Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema*, 103-104.

tenets of the American monomyth: the hero as outside of the community, and in many ways not needing the community in order to function. As Mills notes, "All of this means that Marvel heroes have a commitment to the communities and contexts in which they live, as opposed to the older monomythic formula in which heroes leave town at the end of the story."[100] For Marvel, the characters were "residents instead of visitors." The Fantastic Four functioned as a family, with internal squabbles and problems like most real families. The X-men, too, function in many ways like a surrogate family, which is part of their long-term appeal.[101] This emphasis on the community also meant a different valuation regarding love and relationships. In DC Comics, Superman was forever trying to avoid marrying Lois for the 1950s, 60s, and most of the 70s. For Marvel, on the other hand, marriages occurred, relationships were valued, and part of the tragedy of Spiderman was the death of a girlfriend whom he carried about deeply. Unlike the monomyth, love is not something to be rejected, but rather something to be sought, even if not always successfully.[102]

One of the more interesting assertions Mills makes is that the Marvel revolution which ended up changing the entire industry also introduced the concept of 'sin as personal', rather than evil being defined primarily in terms of threats to private property as maintained by Eco.[103] This meant that the ethics of violence could itself be explored, especially in relation to governmental authority, which would have been almost unheard of a decade before. Iron Man and Captain America, in two separate stories, very publically went against the American government position on the Vietnam War, while the Hulk and the X-men point to a less enthusiastic embrace of the promise of science and technology funded by the state. For Mills, this moral shift was based on two fundamental premises; "First, that every individual human being is valuable; and second, that we are responsible for protecting this dignity to the extent that we are capable of doing so. Thus, as may be inferred from all of the above, Silver Age Marvel placed moral action at the centre of its new hero mythology."[104] It was no longer enough to recognize a villain and simply consider him or her evil. Rather, one had a responsibility to understand the uniqueness of the

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[100] Ibid., 111.
[101] Roy Thomas in *Comics Creators on X-men*, ed. by Tom DeFalco (London: Titan, 2006), 35; Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch*, 107.
[102] For Mills, part of this embrace of love also resulted in the ability to portray female characters in more variety and more seriously than DC. Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema*, 112-115
[103] Ibid., 121.
[104] Ibid., 133.

individual before making an action, which meant the possibility that the right action was to aid the 'villain' in some way that maintained her or his dignity at the same time.[105] This resulted in several major shifts that subvert the myth-as-static conception of the superhero:[106] 1) communal passivity is subverted, insofar as each of us, even the weakest superhero, is responsible for the promotion of justice and the welfare of others; 2) violence, while still present, is not always the best or most appropriate way to deal with social conflict, especially in a lasting manner. As Max and Joey Skidmore note, this "is a remarkable development for the superhero comic book … Mere physical force is no longer able to settle issues and insure that good triumphs over evil."[107]

While the idea of superheroes as myth seems well established within the study of the genre, there is also a general perception of the necessity for allowing cultural developments that impact and inform the manifestation of those myths.[108] As Jeffrey K. Johnson writes:

> Since Superman debuted in 1938 as a Great Depression hero, comic book superheroes have been linked to American hopes, desires, fears, needs, and social norms. Because superhero comic books have always been a form of popular literature, the narratives have closely mirrored and moulded American social trends and changes. This means that superhero stories are excellent primary sources for studying changes in American society from 1938 until the present. They are an American mythology that is forever adjusting to meet society's needs. Superheroes are more than merely comic book characters; rather they are social mirrors and moulders that serve as barometers of the place and time in

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[105] Ibid., 125. Mills notes that Lee introduced a far more complex view of the villain in the Marvel Universe; 'The understanding of villains in terms of motives and personal background, particularly victimhood, was in fact new to the Marvel Age, whereas earlier at DC, villains were defined strictly by their deeds. Lee explicitly prefers a personal relationship between hero and villain – "two human beings in opposition" – which is precisely why Peter Parker, for instance, has had so many father figures who turned out to be foes. This complexity and call for understanding with regard to villains is simply an expression of the turn to reality for Lee. In recognizing them first and foremost as persons, and not as generic devices, he and his successors were able to describe them in basically the same way as the heroes. In other words, neither heroes nor villains are simplistic and altogether guilty or innocent. Rather, like all of us, they have strengths and weaknesses, faults and imperfections, and lovable qualities. … The phenomenon that Lee consistently presents as the reason for our perpetual vilification of others is fear, specifically of that which we do not know and the attendant anxiety that leads us to respond violently to strange others.'

[106] Ibid., 134-135.

[107] Max and Joey Skidmore, "More Than Mere Fantasy: Political Themes in Contemporary Comic Books," *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Summer 1983), 88-89.

[108] Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch*, 17-21.; Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, 231-238. For Coogan what is of greater issue is the way the metaphor that superheroes represent are used to then buttress and construct certain ideaologies and mythologies. In this way he follows Barthes in a suspicion of the naturalizing tendencies that obscure the cultural constuction surrounding the use of the metaphors.

> which they reside. Their stories help us to comprehend our world and allows us to better understand ourselves.[109]

Superhero as myth, in this context, does not mean an appeal to essential categories of myth and archetype, but rather how the genre reflects and naturalizes concepts and ideas. What is needed is an awareness of the ways myths change and develop over time.

The work of Richard Slotkin is particularly useful here. Richard Slotkin's work on the American frontier sought to trace the development of dominant American myths of self and society. Unlike Reynolds, Jewett, and Lawrence, however, Slotkin's approach is very much in keeping with a cultural turn. For Slotkin, myths are:

> simultaneously a psychological and a social activity. The myth is articulated by individual artists and has its effect on the mind of each individual participant, but its function is to reconcile and unite these individualities to a collective identity. A myth that ceases to evoke this religious response, this sense of total identification and collective participation, ceases to *function* as a myth; a tale that, through the course of several generations – or even several retellings within on generation – acquires this kind of evocative powers has evolved into myth.[110]

For Slotkin, there is a difference between the myth as a mythopoeic perception of reality, and the mythic artefact itself; "The mythopoeic mode of consciousness is dependent on – but distinct from – the myth artefact, which is the actual tale of some sacred image or object connected with the myth narrative."[111] Slotkin is interested in exploring the relationship between changing perceptions of the American frontier and American identity. Accordingly, he strives to explore how myths themselves develop. In order to do this, he utilizes Philip Wheelwright's tripartite division of mythic development: primary, romantic, and consummatory. When applied to myth each represents a stage that a culture or society undergoes in regards to mythic formation, development, and re-development.

For Slotkin, the first division, the primary mythic development, refers to the period where the mind and consciousness seeks to "transform experience, perception, and narration into the

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[109] Jeffrey K. Johnson, *Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society, 1938 to the Present* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012), 2.
[110] Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600*-1860, 8.
[111] Ibid., 8.

materials of a myth."[112] In the contexts of the American frontier, this is the first initial encounter with the frontier and the recognition that the skills from the Old World are not sufficient within this new context. In regards to the present, it can also be found in the technological and scientific advancements that invaded the domestic sphere during and after the Second World War: atomic energy, scientific advance, even television provided the material to transform perceptions into mythic forms. Once the narration reaches a point through repetition that the primary myths are established, the reality of the myth "becomes less important than fulfilling the social obligations established for the myths and for the priests who keep and ritualize it."[113] This is the romantic phase where energy is spent on elaborating the myths, making them attractive and understood as a natural part of the world. The consummatory stage results when there is the realization that form has overtaken the substance of the primary myth; the recognition that the myth is not as natural as it appears, but is historically and culturally conditioned. The energy and power of the myth has been stripped away through an awareness of the particular narrative, logical and linguistic forms employed throughout the romantic stage, but there is also a desire to re-harness that power and energy by attempting to create new myths.

For the project of this dissertation, then, the focus on superheroes as myth is an important guiding concept, but myth understood in a particular way. Unlike Jewett, Lawrence, Reynolds, and their followers, myth here is not understood in a static, archetypal way. Indeed, following Barthes, I argue that a focus on archetypes and a constant, unchanging myth actually obscures an awareness of the ideological and cultural developments impacting the 'natural' myth. There is no 'natural' myth, as Slotkin and others note, but myth is constantly engaged in development alongside culture in order to respond to the changing needs of culture. The supposed 'naturalness' of a myth should rather be a clue demanding closer examination as to the reason why energy is being directed to trying to make the myth seem natural. Analyzing superheroes in this way, then, will hopefully illuminate and open up Taylor's arguments in far greater detail.

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[112] Ibid., 7.
[113] Ibid., 12.

# Chapter 4
# – Disenchantment/Re-enchantment/Enchantment

The dynamics and dilemmas of disenchantment are a crucial part of Taylor's argument in *A Secular Age*. In Taylor's view, disenchantment contributes to the rise of the buffered self, the movement to new cosmic imaginaries of time and space, but also to the malaises that accompany certain Enlightenment forms of rationality. As a critical development in opening up different ways of thinking beyond transcendental theism, disenchantment also plays a crucial role in the formation of the Immanent Frame which structures our social imaginary, as well as the rise of the exploding nova of belief. Much of Taylor's argument flows out of his construction and use of the idea of disenchantment. It comes as little surprise then, that Taylor's conception of disenchantment has received considerable attention and criticism from scholars. However, much of the criticism fails to take into account Taylor's purpose and method in *A Secular Age* in using the idea of disenchantment, which is not a strictly historical one. Most of the confusion stems from ambiguities within Taylor's use of the term disenchantment itself, which need to be cleared up in order to more fully analyze Taylor's claims. In general, there is a significant resonance between Taylor's claims regarding disenchantment, the rise of the buffered self, and the desire for re-enchantment felt by many within society. At the same time, by looking more closely at the source material, we can identity certain weaknesses and conflicts within Taylor's construction, especially regarding enchantment in the modern context.

For our purposes here in this chapter, we will begin by taking a look back at Taylor's idea of disenchantment and its use. Returning to Taylor's idea of disenchantment will allow for an opportunity to revisit Taylor's conception of disenchantment discussed in chapter one, but also the opportunity to go beyond the previous discussion in light of the wider scholarship on disenchantment and re-enchantment in the modern context. Next, after having engaged Taylor's conception of disenchantment and explored some of the wider academic discussion, we will turn to an examination of the comics themselves. We will first examine Superman, where issues of disenchantment and re-enchantment are writ large. In many ways, Superman can be seen as

mirroring the process identified by Taylor of a movement from a simple enchantment to disenchantment with the character and the very idea of the superhero, into a search for ways of re-enchantment. We will then turn our attention to the two independent series, *Promethea* and *Astro City*, that have approached issues of disenchantment/re-enchantment in very different ways. Both of them have been able to more directly embrace issues surrounding re-enchantment, as well as providing examples that suggest modern society has not necessarily moved through disenchantment to the degree Taylor seems to suggest. Turning to the final comic series in this study, we will examine the X-men, a series that presents a different approach to these issues. For the X-men, focused on concerns of a more political nature, the question of disenchantment is largely non-existent. This raises some questions concerning Taylor's own focus on the issue as a key element of the modern 'conditions of lived experience'. Finally, we will examine several lingering traces of a primary enchantment found throughout the comics analyzed. These traces suggest that Taylor's insistence on the total replacement of the enchanted age with a disenchanted one, with the porous self for the buffered, may not be as decisive as he suggests.

As noted in the first chapter, Taylor appears to use the idea of disenchantment as a way of describing several related processes that occurred after 1500. As Taylor writes:

> The process of disenchantment is the disappearance of the world [of spirits, demons, and moral forces], and the substitution of what we live today: a world in which the only locus of thoughts, feelings, spiritual élan is what we might call minds; the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans (grosso modo, with apologies to possible Martians or extra-terrestrials); and minds are bounded, so that those thoughts, feelings, etc. are situated "within" them.[1]

In the context of this discussion, Taylor unpacks the process of disenchantment in order to describe how experience has shifted from a porous sense of self to that of the buffered self. The difference is between a self that is perpetually vulnerable to the world of spirits and powers, and a self "… which is aware of the possibility of disengagement."[2] In contrast to the porous self of the medieval world, the buffered self is capable of retreating into itself and disengaging with the world and other selves.

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[1] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 29-30.
[2] Ibid., 42.

While Taylor's treatment of the emergence of the buffered self has largely gone without critique, his exploration of a closely related concept, namely disenchantment, has been a steady focus of debate. Typically the first objection to Taylor's use of disenchantment by his critics is to disparage and reject Taylor's historical analysis as inadequate and fundamentally flawed. Most of the criticism has revolved around his perceived replacement of serious historical study by a faith-based reading of history.[3] Jonathan Sheehan, seeing Taylor's project as more apologetics than history, states; "For the suspicious historian, this sounds like a free lunch. The argument is given the power of historical fact, however construed, while inoculated against historical critique."[4] Others reject Taylor's arguments along the same lines, claiming he forces the historical material to fit his model rather than allowing history to challenge his ideological constructions.[5] John Milbank, too, on historical and theological grounds, questions Taylor's notion of disenchantment both in that it does not adequately account for religious belief, and also that Taylor is too general in its application.[6] The majority of the critiques regarding disenchantment, however, are largely based upon assumptions not maintained by Taylor – or perhaps poorly articulated by him and misconstrued by his critics.

The first assumption is that Taylor is trying to re-construct history, rather than articulating a historical process the outcome of which we already know. Taylor's project is more phenomenological than strictly historical.[7] The second is that 'enchantment' is the issue that Taylor is exploring when he looks at the historical development of disenchantment. Both of these seem basic and justifiable simply considering Taylor's use of the word 'disenchantment'. Taylor has chosen the word himself, and given the importance of the concept, it appears to assume a prior 'enchanted' age out of which disenchantment grew.

Looking back at *A Secular Age*, though, things are not quite as clear. Taylor writes in introducing the idea of disenchantment,

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[3] E.g. Martin Jay, "Faith-Based History," *History and Theory*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Feb. 2009), 76-84; Peter Woodford, "Specters of the Nineteenth Century: Charles Taylor and the Problem of Historicism," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (March 2012), 171-192.
[4] Jonathan Sheehan, "When was disenchantment? History and the secular age," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 227.
[5] Charles Larmore, "How much can we stand?," *The New Republic*, April 9, 2008, http://www.newrepublic.com /article/books/how-much-can-we-stand.
[6] John Milbank, "A Closer Walk on the Wild Side," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 54-82.
[7] Taylor, "Afterwards: Apologia pro Libro Suo," 314-316.

> People lived in an 'enchanted world'. This is perhaps not the best expression; it seems to evoke light and fairies. But I am invoking here its negation, Weber's expression 'disenchantment' as a description of our modern condition. This term has achieved such wide currency in our discussion of these matters that I'm going to use its antonym to describe a crucial feature of the pre-modern condition.[8]

Taylor is not using the word 'disenchantment' as his own distinctive construct, but in the context of Weber's understanding of 'disenchantment'. Also, in this context, 'enchantment' or the 'enchanted world', is not something understood in itself, but in the context of the 'disenchantment' that followed. We live in a disenchanted world: we experience the world from within that context, write within that context, a context that is linked linguistically and temporally to a prior state of experience – enchantment – that we no longer share. But as such, we cannot know the 'enchanted' mind in itself, but only explore the processes by which we moved into a 'disenchanted' world. That is the basis from which Taylor is operating, though he muddies the waters considerably in his description of the 'enchanted' world in *A Secular Age* when he appears to be describing the normative experience of the 'enchanted' mind of that world; "The enchanted world in this sense is the world of spirits, demons, and moral forces which our ancestors lived in."[9]

It is clear from Taylor's response to critics that he is grappling with this ambiguity. In several articles since *A Secular* Age, mostly in response to criticism, Taylor rearticulates in more explicit fashion what he is attempting to convey by the idea of disenchantment. Taylor notes that he is using 'disenchantment' in its Weberian context, as translated from the original German, *Entzauberung*.[10] There are two related, though different, ideas that Taylor is trying to capture through using Weber's terminology. The first, more generally accepted understanding of Weber's *Entzauberung*, is the idea that modern science has disenchanted the world, separating meaning as innate to object, person or place, to the self as the generator of meaning. If a church building is just a church building and not part of an objectively higher space because of its connection with God, then I have to determine, construct, and insert a meaning of that space

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[8] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25-26.
[9] *Ibid*., 26.
[10] Charles Taylor, "Recovering the Sacred," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2011), 114.

within my own frame of reference. From this abundance of meaning, comes the malaise of disenchantment; of the threatened loss of the heroic dimension in life.

Weber's *Entzauberung* also contains as its root *Zauber*, however, which is the German word for "magic". It is the idea of the world as operating on a magical basis that Taylor is primarily trying to convey in the use of the word. More particularly, it is the conception of causation operative within the 'enchanted' world that is challenged and replaced by the process of disenchantment. In one example Taylor frequently employs, a vial of water from Canterbury infused with the general essence of Thomas à Beckett is used to cure someone suffering from a particular ailment. It is an all-purpose cure, because there is a quality of goodness inherent within the object that combats the evil of disease. Even if the vial is used to combat a particular condition, such as the plague, its curative powers are not the same as that of a modern medical drug that combats the disease owning to its chemical composition rather than its spiritual power.[11]

This magical view of the world is based upon both a moral and religious understanding of things, as well as a cosmic account of reality that places things and people in a hierarchical structure. In this hierarchical structure certain objects or places are stronger than others, and so can impact them not in particular, symptomatic ways, but in a general sense. By tapping into or manipulating those objects or places one is able to access a world of power. But in an ordered cosmos, with God at its head, this creates potential problems. God becomes bound to humans through ritual, leading to questions concerning God's sovereignty. As Taylor notes, it was a religious impulse to protect God's power and grace that provided the first stirrings of what was to constitute the disenchanted experience.[12] By insisting upon the sovereignty of God and the inefficacy of rituals in directly creating particular conditions, both the hierarchical and moral structure of the enchanted world was put into question. A weakening of one meant the weakening of the other.

In Taylor's example of beating the bounds of the parish, it is difficult to imagine that if a villager was unable to participate with the community in beating the bounds of the parish there was necessarily always a year of bad crops. However, prior to disenchantment an explanation of

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[11] Charles Taylor, "Disenchantment-Reenchantment," in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 287-288.
[12] Ibid., 288.

this discrepancy would not involve serious questioning of the hierarchical, magical nature of the world, most likely being explained away by other factors. If the same villager refused to participate because they did not believe that such an action compelled God to act, then it became a challenge to both the hierarchical and moral structure of the enchanted worldview. As Taylor notes, "elite theory and popular sensibility interpenetrated and strengthened each other."[13] The failed efficacy of the ritual could provide support for a critique of the notion of a hierarchical, ordered universe as a valid account of things. An appeal to these "facts" now buttressed the elite theory regarding the moral and theological necessity of maintaining God's absolute sovereignty.

This breakdown in the hierarchical vision of the cosmos also provided an opportunity to question those forces that claimed to act as intermediaries. A priest could not manipulate or coerce God into affecting cures through sacramentals, but neither could others use such measures for ill. Moral worth and worthiness did not inhere to a thing or place, but in minds – first God's mind, and then human perception. But if the intermediary was perceived as no longer affecting a particular cause, then the popular perception of cause and effect is fundamentally altered.[14] This part of Taylor's argument seems a little stretched, neglecting the complexity of medieval science,[15] but he is driving towards an important point. This breakdown, or at least questioning, of a vertical cause and effect provided the opportunity for a horizontal cause and effect that did not rely on God as a direct factor.

Taylor in his own account glosses over medieval science and Scholastic reasoning in order to give a popular reading of the enchanted world. This is problematic from a historical point of view considering his sources post-enchantment are not popular but part of elite intellectual culture. In short, he is comparing intellectual traditions with popular traditions, rather than popular to popular, or medieval intellectual traditions to early modern ones. It is interesting in this respect, in exploring the movement to disenchantment, that Taylor neglects the Salem witch-hunts and other instances of popular enchantment that occurred after 1500, and which spoke to a more uneasy relationship to the supernatural than Taylor would seem to

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[13] Taylor, "Recovering the Sacred," 115.
[14] Ibid., 114-115.
[15] See, for example, Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages: Their Religious, Institutional, and Intellectual Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and David C. Lindberg's *The Beginnings of Western Science: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, Religious, and Institutional Context, 600 B.C. To A.D. 1450* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

suggest. Likewise, he does not explore how moral worth was shifted away from an object or thing and into the person, but largely takes it as a given. This does seem to represent a gap in Taylor's construction, as it seems to ignore certain developments or lingering traces of thought and how they might affect the modern self. For instance, there is a strong case to be made, especially in the case of illness, that moral worth is still tied to something beyond human perception. There is a 'badness' attributed to illness that assumes health as not only better, but morally 'good'. Indeed, even our language seems to tie together health and moral worth, which makes Taylor's lack of development of the issue a gap that needs further exploration. Jonathan Metzl and Anna Rutherford Kirkland, for instance, argue that the moral and ideological connotations attributed to certain conceptions of health and the body actually prevent better diagnostic and perceptual conceptions of health and the body.[16] Along this same vein is the prevalance and rise of those theologies, especially Christian, espousing and supporting a form of prosperity gospel whereby not only morality, but God's favour too is linked to health and prosperity.[17]

Insofar as Taylor is attempting to understand the changes in society "which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even among the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others,"[18] this failure to compare like with like, intellectual with intellectual, and popular with popular in the transition between an 'enchanted' and 'disenchanted' world, is problematic. However, as Taylor is attempting to articulate the 'conditions of lived experience' of the modern self, one might argue that this lack of consistency is not a major issue. Popular and elite culture come together to form the frame of experience, and that is the primary object of Taylor's interest. Indeed, rather than seeing popular and elite as separate, Taylor is trying to grapple with the experience of disenchantment of the modern self. We live in a disenchanted world, for Taylor, that comes first: the condition of the self is one of disenchantment. The world of enchantment is always secondary, a reconstruction from out of our disenchanted state. We first recognize the buffered, disenchanted self, and so

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[16] Jonathan Metzl and Anna Rutherford Kirkland, *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).
[17] G. C. Mora, "Marketing the 'Health and Wealth Gospel' across National Borders: Evidence from Brazil and the United States," *Poetics*, Vol. 36, No. 5-6 (2008), 404-420.
[18] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

posit an enchanted and porous prior state, the contents of which are reconstructed based on our present experience, but it is only ever a reconstruction.[19]

To see the results of disenchantment is to see the modern self, unhooked in both time and space. In this context, Taylor sees us moving from an ordered cosmos with meaning anchored in the hierarchical order, to an infinite universe filled with meaning, but meaning of our own making. In terms of time, meaning has shifted from an anchored, eternal, sacred marking of time, to one where humans are part of an ever-changing evolutionary process. At root is the move from a porous self, vulnerable to outside forces, to a buffered self capable of detachment and disengagement; "As a bounded self, I can see the boundary as a buffer, such that the things beyond don't need to 'get to me,' to use the contemporary expression. That's the sense to my use of the term 'buffered' here and in *A Secular Age*. This self can see itself as invulnerable, as master of the meaning of things for it."[20] Taylor continually links this notion of the buffered self to the concept of disenchantment. But while Taylor leaves the door open to attempts at re-enchantment in the Western process of disenchantment, he has no such views regarding the buffered self; "We can't go back. Mainly because the enchanted world is a matter of experience. Our buffered selves can't return to 'porous' status."[21] As a matter of 'conditions of lived experience,' though, this issue becomes more complicated as one attempts to engage aspects of popular culture.

As Taylor frequently notes, however, there is a sense in which for all the gains achieved in the emergence of the disenchanted, buffered self, some perceive that we have lost too much. What has been gained through disenchantment is the sense of self-control and self-direction that was lacking in a world where the self was constantly vulnerable to outside forces. The expression of love one had for another might be because of genuine feelings of affection, but they might also be because of Cupid's indiscriminate arrows, or even a love potion used against one's will. The recourse in the last example was not to one's own will and power in sloughing

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[19] As Taylor notes, in "Disenchantment-Reenchantment"; "the process of disenchantment is irreversible. The aspiration to reenchant (or the apprehended danger this threatens) points to a different process, which may indeed produce features analogous to the enchanted world, but does not in any simple sense restore it." (287). Taylor uses the concept of disenchantment to emphasis the rise of the buffered mind, but as the rest of the essay makes clear, a major point of the essay is to emphasize that re-enchantment is not a product of enchantment, but that of the buffered mind and disenchantment (292, 294-295, 297-302).

[20] Charles Taylor, "Buffered and porous selves," *The Immanent Frame*. September 2, 2008, http://blogs.ssrc.org /tif/2008/09/02/buffered-and-porous-selves/.

[21] Taylor, "Re-covering the Sacred," 115.

off the influence of this external affect, but in appeal to an object of external power stronger than the love potion. The self was in the hands of others, with the sense of fear that this absence of control inevitably generated. Disenchantment broke that fear by making the individual capable of disengaging itself from others and their influence, and created the modern notion of the individual self. Now, we live in a world of freedom and possibility, where the self is able to generate and navigate meaning for itself. There was much gained in the process of disenchantment, and the emergence of the buffered self is a development that few people would seriously like to see reversed.

However, along with the rise of the buffered self there has been a perception of a flattening of life, of meaning, that Taylor identified back in *Sources of the Self* as the *malaise* of disenchantment. This is an interesting point and does seem to colour Taylor's treatment of the issue in general. Disenchantment, in Taylor's construction, is defined, in significant ways, by what it is lacking. Even tied to *Entzauberung*, it is defined by a non-magical view of the world of causation – that causation is based horizontally rather than vertically. This, then, results in an odd double negation in attempting to articulate the normative stance of experience for the modern, Western self. Disenchantment is framed as less a positive embrace of the scientific approach to cause and effect, than describing an experience of a movement away from a magical view of the way the world operates.[22] But additionally, it is framed as a lack, as a flattening out of the heroic dimension to life.[23] In such an understanding there is little time or opportunity to view disenchantment itself as a good. Taylor might posit the benefits of disenchantment, but they can seem to be quickly outweighed by the costs.

Despite being articulated as part of the normative experience of the modern self, according to Taylor, in important ways it is re-enchantment that defines the modern frame of experience. This is frequently raised as a critique by some of Taylor's critics. While he describes transcendental theism in positive language, this affirmative tone is largely absent in his discussion of the varieties of immanent humanism. For William Connolly, while largely sympathetic to Taylor's project, Taylor's approach to exclusive humanism raises concerns. "Instead," Connolly notes, "I draw upon a wider band of immanent naturalists who find time to be composed of multiple force fields periodically interacting in an open universe without divine

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[22] Taylor, "Challenging Issues About the Secular Age," 415; Taylor, "Recovering the Sacred," 114.
[23] Taylor, "Afterwards: Apologia pro Libro Suo," 303-304; Charles Taylor, "Buffered and porous selves."

transcendence."[24] For Connolly, an immanent philosophy of becoming allows for an open immanence, which orients the self into future-becoming rather than a strict materialist past, which he sees as an alternative to Taylor's understanding of immanent humanism as 'dwelling' in the past.[25] Connolly, here, is engaging a longer history of interaction with Taylor, whereby Taylor noted a need for a particular *direction* of being within his own ontology of the human person.[26] By emphasizing a future, teleological orientation, Connolly is attempting to offer to Taylor a fuller view of the human person from the perspective of exclusive humanism.

Drawing from this teleological orientation, '"re-enchantment" … doesn't undo the "disenchantment" which occurs in the modern period. It re-establishes the non-arbitrary, non-projective character of certain demands on us, which are firmly anchored in our being-in-the-world.'[27] But this view of re-enchantment, based on Taylor's notion of moral realism, is heavily biased towards an intellectual appropriation of re-enchantment. Re-enchantment is found first and foremost in mental activities, while the bodily being-in-the-world seems to be a secondary or tertiary concern. This minimizing of the body and re-enchantment is seen particularly in his dismissive regard towards feelings of 'frisson' often associated with re-enchantment in the modern world, such as getting chills at a horror movie. "So people go to movies about the uncanny to experience a frisson. Our peasant ancestors would have thought us insane. You can't get a frisson from what in fact terrifies you."[28] In this way, movies and many popular stories allow us to "give ourselves frisson, while still holding the reality at bay."[29] While Taylor uses this idea of frisson and modern re-enchantment frequently in *A Secular Age*, though it is also found in his previous work in *Sources of the Self*,[30] it pops up repeatedly in Taylor's

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[24] William Connolly, "Belief, Spirituality, and Time," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 128; Connolly might have chosen a better word as Taylor has often been critical about scientific naturalism and its relation to positivism; see David McPherson, "Taylor and Mcdowell on Re-Enchantment," academia.edu, Accessed May 15, 2014, https://www.academia.edu/1553585/Taylor_and_McDowell_on_Re-Enchantment.

[25] Connolly uses the language of Roof in this context, as Taylor had in *A Secular Age*, to posit immanent humanism as a positive association of modern-day spiritual seekers with a teleological orientation to the future. William Connolly, "Belief, Spirituality, and Time," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 135-136.

[26] Cf.: Connolly, William E. 1985. "Taylor, Foucault, and Otherness," *Political Theory*, Vol. 13, No. 3, August 1985, 365-376, esp. 375; and Taylor, "Connolly, Foucault, and Truth," *Political Theory*, Vol. 13, No. 3, August 1985, 377-85, esp. 384-385.

[27] Taylor, "Recovering the Sacred," 117; cf. Taylor, "Disenchantment-Reenchantment," 292-294.

[28] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

[29] Ibid., 741; cf. 337, 581.

[30] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 192; cf. 298, 437, Taylor, "Buffered and Porous Selves".

responses to critics. However there is questionable basis for Taylor's claims here, and in fact a growing body of evidence that suggests the contrary.

Lynn Schofield Clark's work in *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media and the Supernatural* offers an excellent case in point. The main focus of her study is to examine the relationship between youth, religious identity, and the supernatural in popular culture.[31] Her study was based on interviews with 269 people, 100 of them teens, on their religious and spiritual identity in relation to their media practices.[32] Rather than focusing on a particular element to explore, Clark interviewed the participants with an eye to how media, religion and spirituality fit within their personal narratives. Addressed in that light, her study underlines a wide variety of ways that media on the supernatural are put to use beyond mere 'frissons'. Belief in aliens, for instance, serves a particular purpose for young people by marking out space within the wider culture.[33]

One of her main points, in fact, drawing upon her earlier research, is that the appeal to horror, aliens and the supernatural, is a result of the American experience of evangelical revival, what she calls "the dark side of evangelicalism".[34] The evangelical use of images of hell, devils, and the supernatural as elements to be feared, in order to generate a return to God, also hold within them a perennial fascination not reducible or controllable by the evangelical leaders that employed them. They became sources of frisson to be sure, but also gave rise to the possibility of investing that feeling itself with new sources of meaning, or rather those feelings become the impetus to find meaning. As Schofield Clark notes, the assumption that teens encounter religion mainly through traditional religious institutions such as church, mosque and synagogue, may be mistaken in this media rich world. Rather, the supernatural and transcendent is also discovered by many young people through movies and television shows of the supernatural, that then prompt reflection and the desire to seek greater information regarding spiritual beliefs.[35] The idea that frisson is somehow a mere feeling does not necessarily reflect the experience of teens upon which Schofield Clark's study is based. It might, however, reveal a certain presumption in Taylor towards the intellectual at the expense of the visceral.

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[31] Lynn Schofield-Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural*, vii.
[32] Ibid., 18.
[33] Ibid., 206-207.
[34] Ibid., 24-45.
[35] Ibid., 4-5.

While her study remains an important work both methodologically and for the breadth of her analysis, the central idea that media, and especially images of the supernatural, are mediated into wider self narratives of spiritual identity is not new. Especially regarding images of the supernatural and horror, there is an abundance of material that indicates such elements do not function on the level of 'frisson' and titillation, but serve to resolve and lay bare real societal concerns and anxieties. Indeed, dismissing horror and the like as a mere feeling of 'frisson' as Taylor appears to do, dismisses the entire field of teratology and explorations into questions of the liminal role of the monster and the monstrous within society and constructions of the self. [36] These will be examined in more detail in the next chapter.

Another way to look at re-enchantment is through the creative amalgamation of the supernatural with disengaged reason, rather than perceiving it as a malaise – a lack. As Scott Preston argues, Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow* is an example of a different form of rationality than commonly understood by the term. In the movie, the hero, Ichabod Crane, starts out in the model of a scientific hero, securely set within the context of the Immanent Frame. He believes in science, observation, and proof, rejecting as superstition all claims of the supernatural. As the movie progresses, his scepticism is worn away as he discovers the supernatural is very real. But he is still a rationalist, and while he is dealing with the supernatural there are still *rational* laws inherent to the supernatural; once he discovers those rules, he is able to rationally manipulate them. Whether something is magical or supernatural there are laws at work that define that power. By manipulating or playing by the logic of those laws, Crane triumphs. As Preston concludes; "In the end, the opposition between enchantment and disenchantment that was set up in the opening scenes of the film, is resolved not by championing one or the other but by combining the two. The solution to the mystery is *both* a natural and a supernatural explanation."[37] In this new vision of re-enchantment, there is no reason why reason and the supernatural should not co-exist in a world more complex than previously imagined.

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[36] E.g.: Andrew Tudor, "Why Horror? The Peculiar Pleasures of a Popular Genre," *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (1997), 443-463; G. J. Annas, "Mapping the Human Genome and the Meaning of Monster Mythology," *Emory Law Journal*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (1990); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed.), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Joseph Andriano, *Immortal Monster: The Mythological Evolution of the Fantastic Beast in Modern Fiction and Film* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).
[37] Preston, "Horror and Reenchantment: A Supernatural Genre in a Secular Age," 208.

At the very least, these authors suggest that the categories and interaction between disenchantment and re-enchantment is far more complicated than Taylor seems to suggest. While Preston argues for the melding of science and the supernatural in modern forms of re-enchantment, Michael Ostling argues that the addition of reason into the realm of the supernatural represents a disenchantment of fantasy and the magical. Using the example of Harry Potter, Ostling seeks to "contest the picture of the Harry Potter books as a source of wonder, a breath of fresh, numinous air in our stale modern existences. I will suggest that Rowling's books describe, not the extraordinariness of the ordinary," that characterizes re-enchantment, "but rather the ordinariness of the extraordinary."[38] Magic in the world of Harry Potter is familiar, because it acts and re-acts like another form of science or reason, rather than as a source of wonder and the supernatural. In contrast to Preston, Ostling is more acutely aware of the underlying ideological issues present in the discussion regarding disenchantment and re-enchantment; "Certainly one must be aware that 'disenchantment', if read to mean the Whiggish narrative of the progress and triumph of the rational, can become its own myth, more enchanting than what it supplants,"[39] but that does not necessarily need to be the case. "I agree that the concept is open to such abuses, but I don't think outlining experiential differences between modernity and pre-modernity necessarily entail them. In particular, I reject the notion that a narrative of disenchantment need imply either that 'we' are demystified in general or that 'enchanted societies are stable, static, and unquestioning."[40] There is an ideological element implicit within such discussions that needs to be acknowledged.

These are all factors that are necessary to keep in mind going forward into the analysis of disenchantment in the superhero genre. Painting the Taylorian picture of the 'conditions of lived experience,' disenchantment is linked to the buffered self, and through them both to Enlightenment notions of disengaged and detached reason. In like manner, there is an emphasis on the mind, will and intellect as defining aspects of the self. However, there is also a tension here, as disenchantment threatens to leave us anchorless in an unfeeling universe with only our own meaning to sustain us. This is the malaise of disenchantment felt as a lack in the heroic

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[38] Michael Ostling, "Harry Potter and the Disenchantment of the World," *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2003), 4.
[39] Ibid., 8.
[40] Ibid.

register. When all meaning is self-generated, then what is the point in giving your life to an idea or thought that only comes from the self?

This leaves one category still unexplored, and that is the idea of 'enchantment'. This is, at the very least, an underdeveloped category in Taylor's work, filled with apparent contradictions and ambivalences. Taylor describes the enchanted world, on one hand, simply as "the world of spirits, demons, moral forces which our predecessors acknowledged."[41] Taylor then goes on to describe that the heart of the enchanted experience, how we have "naively taken things to be," was circumscribed by a porousness of the self towards the surrounding world. This is contrasted with the modern self as a buffered self, bounded and living in a universe of other mind-like selves.[42] While he consistently insists on the incompatibility of the modern, buffered self with the experience of porous vulnerability, Taylor does offer the caveat that one can *make* oneself porous.[43] In much the same way, according to Taylor, we do not live in an 'enchanted' world, or rather "at the very least, we live in a *much less* 'enchanted' world."[44] With these equivocations in mind it is very difficult to form a coherent view of enchantment in Taylor's understanding, and whether or not we should discount it so easily as a factor in the modern experience. Despite this, there seem to be two ways which we can approach the topic. The first is precisely the way in which the enchanted world of spirits, fairies, and the like are portrayed in the superhero genre, with close attention to the porousness of boundaries that would denote 're-enchantment' rather than a primary enchantment. The second is in images and story elements that rely on a 'magical' causation of a vertical nature, rather than a horizontal one of scientific cause and effect – where proximity to a magical object heals someone, for example, not because of any cause and effect principle, but because of the very nature and being of the magical object itself.

Turning to the source material for this study, with an eye towards Taylor's hypotheses regarding disenchantment, it will be helpful to focus the discussion on five elements within Taylor's construction of disenchantment and the buffered self. These five elements are: disenchantment as the rise of the rational self; the buffered self as a certain perception of the self

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[41] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 29.
[42] Ibid., 30.
[43] Taylor, "Buffered and Porous Selves."
[44] Ibid.

focusing on mind; disenchantment as malaise, as the loss of the heroic dimension; re-enchantment and the ways of reconstructing meaning after disenchantment; and forms of primary enchantment that might not have disappeared to the extent Taylor would seem to suggest.

In many ways the Superman line of comics is defined by its relation to the idea of disenchantment in all its variations. Superman himself is defined more by his will, purpose, and intellect to fans of the series, than his super-strength and various levels of invulnerability. His self-control is a regular motif, often seen in 'what if?' scenarios – what if Superman had landed as a baby in the Soviet Union, Britain, etc.? In these scenarios one of the defining characteristics that marks Superman as recognizable is his firm will and self-control over himself and his powers. A Superman that is anything less than self-possessed is rarely portrayed. His unfailing self-direction as a barometer of what is right is rooted in his upbringing, but also lodged firmly in his construction of self. He is the buffered self made manifest. If he was vulnerable to outside forces, it would result in disaster. A porous Superman, subject to external forces and control, is the ultimate weapon of mass destruction.[45] He is the buffered self, but he must also maintain the buffered self at all costs. Yet, it is also disenchantment as malaise, not only a loss of the heroic but a loss in the *belief* of the heroic, which has proven to be Superman's greatest foe. It has been an increasingly frequent theme within his comics, but also an external factor monetarily influencing the direction of Superman comics. If a dark, brooding Batman is selling comics, make Superman darker too and you will tap in to the same audience. This shift to a darker world-view and presentation of the Superman genre arose after the popularity of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Watchmen*, both published in the mid-80s. Finally, disenchantment as a positive value can also be found in abundance within the Superman line, though generally in the form of arch-villains such as Lex Luthor and Brainiac. However, especially in the case of Lex Luthor, these stories are not always clear cut. When Luthor emphasizes the use of his human mind and will to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles, lauding disengaged reason and untrammelled scientific progress at the same time, the reader is sometimes left with a feeling of

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[45] This fear is actually played out in one story arc, *Superman: Sacrifice*, where Superman is mind-controlled to see his friends as his enemies. It results in Wonder Woman snapping Maxwell Lord's neck, the man manipulating Superman, and leading to a worldwide (in terms of the DC universe) disillusionment of superheroes; Greg Rucka, et al., *Superman: Sacrifice* (New York: DC Comics, 2006).

divided loyalties. Insofar as Luthor is an example of the capability of the human will and intellect, he is tapping into the human sacred values of will and self-sufficiency. Yet, he almost invariably violates other sacred values that are also prized such as human freedom and equality. But in this conflict between sacred values, we can feel the ambiguity of the conflict of those values juxtaposed on Luthor himself.

The pre-1986 Superman, before a company-wide re-launch in the wake of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*,[46] is interesting not only in connection with the camp and innocence of its stories, but also for the prevalence of magic and magical elements within the storylines. Indeed, from 1980 to 1986, out of 80 issues of *Action Comics*, 14 issues (approx. 20%) directly utilized magic or the supernatural as key plot elements.[47] Given the character of the pre-Byrne Superman this is understandable. Over the course of decades his strength and invulnerability had continued to rise to the point where he could move entire planets.[48] It seemed that little could challenge him, except for magic to which Superman was vulnerable.[49] It is significant that the portrayal of magic did not contain any attempt to provide pseudo-scientific explanations of magical forces or persons, counter to other comics such as X-men published at the same time. Indeed, according to Roz Kaveney, this marks a fundamental difference between DC and Marvel Comics. DC Comics, based upon Jewish-Christian mythology is open to the transcendent and the possibility of magic and the supernatural, breaking free of the necessity for scientific rationalization as a result of that transcendent reality. The Marvel universe, on the other hand, is based far more on a Gnostic understanding of reality.[50] Magic in the DC Universe was accepted as a given, and

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[46] *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was a DC company wide event that was created in order to simplify and correct continuity errors that had started to plague DC Comics after writing a continuous superhero universe over 50 years (Marv Wolfman, "Crisis Beginnings" in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, Marv Wolfman (w), George Pérez (p), #1 (April 1985)). Superman, for example, originally could not fly but could leap great distances due to Krypton's greater gravity. This was later changed to fit with the radio series, to make him capable of flight because of the yellow sun. He was originally the sole survivor of Krypton's destruction, but then later had relatives and other Kryptonians written into his series when it was needed.

[47] This is in interesting contrast to the period 1975-1979, where the overwhelming majority of stories dealt with "super-science" and aliens, only 4 issues dealing with the supernatural or magic in any way.

[48] John LaTouche, "Red, White, and Bruised: the Vietnam War and the Weakening of Superman," in *The Ages of Superman: The Man of Steel in Changing Times*, 92.

[49] Early in 1971 kryptonite as a foil is effectively removed by Dennis O'Neil, who has all kryptonite rendered inert in a freak accident in the first issue of his run on *Superman* (Dennis O'Neil (w), Curt Swan (p), "Superman Breaks Loose," Superman, Vol.1 #233 (January 1971), DC Comics.).

[50] Roz Kaveney, *Superheroes!: Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Films* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 37-42.

treated as operating precisely as magical. Even something as simple as a magic wand was portrayed in an unquestioningly straight-forward manner.[51]

Despite the prevalence of magic in the pre-1986 Superman comics, there is little doubt that this period was dominated by the disenchanted, rational, scientific world denoted by the immanent frame. Superman repeatedly finds himself faced with situations that appear magical, only to be shown to have their basis in alien technology or future science.[52] Indeed, the image of Superman using 'super-science' (which is not much different than regular science), and even super-logic and rationality to defeat foes becomes a trope throughout this period.

In 1986, in the wake of a company-wide re-launch, comic artist John Byrne was given the task of re-framing Superman. His revisionist work on Superman, and the impact of the *Crisis on Infinite Worlds* series, broke with tradition so much that it is now typical to speak of Superman pre- and post-Byrne. In the mini-series *The Man of Steel*, which runs from when Clark was born until he was 28, Byrne offers a very different origin story with a number of crucial departures from that of the pre-*Crisis* story line.[53] In this reconception of the Superman mythos, in the midst of the Cold War, Superman is born fully American, having been placed as a foetus in a 'birthing matrix' by his parents before being sent to Earth. Taking a nod from the X-men and other comics, Superman's powers are established to have developed gradually over time with exposure to Earth's yellow sun, only really manifesting during adolescence. This also meant that his power levels were more closely tied to his exposure to the Sun, and thus did not reach the heights of the pre-Byrne era. Gone, too, is Lex Luthor as mad scientist constantly confronting Superman with some new invention. He is replaced by the 1980s bogeyman: a power-hungry billionaire capitalist with a team of lawyers that get him out of anything. All of it, the entire series, seems built around trying to make Superman – and the Superman mythos – more believable, requiring a rejection of those elements that appeared too fantastic.

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[51] Cary Bates (w), Curt Swan (p), "Superman Takes a Wife," *Action Comics*, Vol. 1 #484 (June 1978), DC Comics.
[52] E.g.: Cary Bates (w), Curt Swan (p), "Terra At Nine O'Clock," *Action Comics*, Vol. 1 #468 (February 1977), DC Comics; Cary Bates (w), Curt Swan (p), "Superman Takes A Wife," *Action Comics*, Vol. 1 #484 (June 1978), DC Comics; Marv Wolfman (w), Curt Swan (p), "Sorcery Over Stonehenge," *Action Comics*, Vol. 1 #527 (January 1982), DC Comics.
[53] Given the radical nature of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, where various superheroes and secondary characters that were created during the first 50 years of DC Comics were killed off, one way or demarcating the DC timeline is to refer to pre- and post-*Crisis* when referring to DC superhero history.

It is interesting to note that of all the names of Superman Byrne could have chosen to name his Superman origin series, he selected "Man of Steel".[54] This was part of a more general shift towards a grittier and darker view of superheroes that had been building throughout at least the early half of the 1980s.[55] In order to stay relevant, Superman had to follow suit, but risked falling into a loss of the heroic dimension of life that defined the character. In regards to disenchantment as malaise, this period also saw significant development in the Superman mythos. In order to increase his waning popularity, there was a push to make Superman 'darker,' and more morally ambivalent. Before the end of the 1980s, Superman's storylines had him violate his oath not to kill, while also becoming involved in stopping a super street gang war, among others. In one of the most infamous Superman storylines, Superman is brainwashed by the villain Skeez and is filmed in 'adult situations' with the superheroine Big Barda.[56]

This trend towards darker storylines, as well as a desire for more profitable storylines, led to the death of Superman story arc in 1992. The death of Superman, at the hands of a Kryptonian killing machine, was an event slowly developed over seven comics, with the creature's first appearance in *Superman: Man of Steel* #17. This initial appearance was confined to the last page of the comic, consisting of four horizontal panels stretching across the page, with three of them featuring a hand hammering away at polished metal. The comic closed simply with "Doomsday is coming!" Over the next six issues, the tension builds as Doomsday makes his slow, inexorable journey to Metropolis, leaving a path of destruction in his wake. When the entire Justice League is beaten by Doomsday, the task falls to Superman. Superman finally kills Doomsday, but in the process he is beaten to death by the creature. Superman, the most recognizable icon of the superhero age, a shining beacon of truth, justice, and the American way, is beaten by a creature bred for the single purpose of surviving: Doomsday was created to be the perfect buffered being, able to conquer death itself, and willing to kill anything or anyone who might pose a modicum of threat to its existence.[57] In the end, Superman dies in the arms of Lois Lane, in an image that is almost iconic itself, drawing liberally from Michelangelo's *Pieta*.

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[54] Superman has also variously been referred to as: the Man of Tomorrow, the Last Son of Krypton, the Metropolis Marvel, and the Big Blue Cheese.
[55] John Byrne's *Man of Steel* mini-series came out in 1987, but was preceded in 1986 by Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns*, and in 1986-1987 by Alan Moore's *Watchmen*.
[56] This questionable content is made far worse by the apparent rape of Big Barda by Skeez in the infamous previous issue (John Byrne (w, p), "A Walk on the Darkside," *Action Comics*, Vol. 1 #592 (September 1987), DC Comics.)
[57] Dan Jurgens (w, p), *Superman/Doomsday: Hunter/Prey*, Vol. 1 #2 (May 1994), DC Comics.

Various news sources covered this development in the arc of the Superman story, including the New York Times, Newsday, and even CNN.[58] This should have been the end of the Superman story, allowing the mantel to be picked up by others. However, a little more than a year later, Superman returned. This event, the cynical death and resurrection of Superman, had two very important impacts, both related in different ways to disenchantment. The first was quite tangible, contributing to breaking the bubble on the comic book collectible market that had been growing at that time. Comic books were being marketed with variant covers, special editions, and hyped events all in the anticipation that buying such a product would result in a pay-off in the long-term.[59] When the various fans, buying *Superman (vol.2)* #75 thinking it would make them a quick profit, tried to sell the comic the next year, they realized their investment had been less profitable than assumed: all of the people who had wanted the comic had already bought it, and not enough time had passed to enhance its value. The bottom fell out of the whole comic book market, so much so that by the end of the decade Marvel comics had filed for bankruptcy.[60]

But there was another, less tangible form of disenchantment as well, felt by comic book fans, that remains with the industry to this day. With Superman being the most easily recognizable superhero character, there was also an understanding not only of who he was, but what he stood for: truth and justice. Other superhero characters had died and come back in surprising twists and turns, most notably Jean Grey as the Phoenix in the X-men series, but none of the other characters represented the values Superman did and to the extent that he did. Those values of truth and justice, attributed to Superman, were also partly attributed to the writers and editors of the series who were entrusted with the iconic character. When it became evident to fans that the whole Death and Return of Superman was largely a sales ploy, the market plummeted. "Frankly, I view that particular marketing event as being the greatest catastrophe to strike the world of comics since the Kefauver Senate hearings of 1955," notes Chuck Rozanski,

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[58] Larry Tye, *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero* (New York: Random House, 2012), 245.
[59] C.f.: Newswatch: Industry Sales Records in 1993 Shadowed by Collapse of Speculator Boom: Image Receives Brunt of Criticism for Their Role in Market Crash," *The Comics Journal* #166 (February 1994), 27-33; Comics Publishers Suffer Tough Summer: Body Count Rises in Market Shakedown," *The Comics Journal* #172 (Nov. 1994), 13-18.
[60] Dan Raviv's *Comic Wars: Marvel's Battle for Survival* (Sea Cliff, NY: Heroes Books, 2004) offers a good glimpse of the machinations behind the scenes for the acquisition of Marvel Comics.

president and CEO of Mile High Comics.[61] There was a disenchantment and rupture between the fans themselves and those in charge of protecting and giving life to beloved characters. Worse, it was viewed by readers as contrived by the editorial team as a gimmick in the first place.[62] While fans still read the comics, still followed the stories, something had happened, a trust was broken. The death of Superman meant that any event in the life of a superhero character was provisional on account of profit. The superhero genre, through its greatest icon of enchantment, became disenchanted with superheroes.

Throughout the 1990s, Superman, as well as the entire superhero genre, continued to fight and struggle over questions not unrelated to Taylor's malaise of disenchantment. This period has been referred to by some as the "Iron Age" of comics to denote the rising levels of extreme violence found throughout the genre.[63] It is also seen by others as a period of deconstruction and revision, where the tropes of the genre were dissected under a microscope and then re-fashioned. One series in particular seemed to revel in its role in deconstructing the genre by consciously challenging many of its values and assumptions. *The Authority*, first published in 1999, consisted of a superhero team modelled loosely on the concept of the superhero team as developed by such established groups as the Justice League and the Avengers. Within the ranks of The Authority was a homosexual couple operating under the names of Apollo and the Midnighter, consciously modeled directly after Superman and Batman respectively.[64] Within the series the Authority killed God, defied the notion that superheroes should maintain the status quo by deposing rulers they considered unfit, and even took over the United States in a bloodless coup.[65] Geoff Klock notes that, "The Authority is the zenith of the superhero qua power fantasy, and the degree to which readers enjoy the title is the degree to

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[61] Rozanski, "Death of Superman Promotion," Mile High Comics. Accessed May 15, 2014, http://www.milehighcomics.com/tales/cbg127.html.

[62] Larry Tye, *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero*, 243-246.

[63] Peter Coogan's *Superheroes: A Secret Origin of a Genre*, 214-218 probably provides one of the best descriptions and justifications for the naming and demarcation of this age, though it is far from universally accepted. See also: Sharon Packer, *Superheroes and Superegos: Analyzing the Minds Behind the Masks* (Santa Barbara: Praeger/ABC-CLIO, 2010), 69-72; Alex S. Pagnucci and Gian S. Romagnoli, *Enter the Superheroes: American Values, Culture, and the Canon of Superhero Literature* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 208-211, which attempts to provide a canon of illustrative Iron Age superhero examples.

[64] *The Authority* was published by Wildstorm Comics, a branch of DC Comics and thus able to get away with potential copyright issues.

[65] With interesting parallels to Bush's invasion of Iraq around the same time; Julian Darius, "Mark Millar's *the Authority* and the Polemic over Iraq," *Sequart* (July 19, 2003), http://sequart.org/magazine/899/mark-millars-the-authority-and-the-polemic-over-iraq/.

which they participate in the genre for precisely this reason."[66] While the initial run by Warren Ellis and Bryan Hitch was well received, Mark Millar's run took it into the muddy world of politics, leading to the series slowly falling out of circulation.

At the same time as the superhero genre was exploring the limits of violence and sexuality, there was a push to retain what had made superheroes a success in the first place – the heroic dimension of their deeds that had made them into icons. This required two processes, though: first deconstruction, and then reconstruction. However, not everyone felt the need to reconstruct the genre after it was taken apart. On the one hand, there were deconstructionist comics such as *Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen*, but also *Planetary*, *Transmetropolitan*, and Grant Morrison's run on *Animal Man*. What is often noted with these, with the possible exception of the last, is that their purpose is not to build anything greater, but largely to take the elements of the genre and strip them down to expose their roots. On the other hand, there were reconstructionist comics that strip down the genre in order to make it better, such as *Marvels*, *Kingdom Come*, and *All-Star Superman*. All of this turmoil resulted in considerable questioning and examination of what precisely was the nature of, not only Superman, but the superhero genre in general, and especially its ability to speak from a moral standpoint.

*Action Comics* #775, published in March 2001, is a case in point. Entitled "What's so funny about truth, justice and the American way?,"[67] the story has Superman facing a superhero team called the Elite that acted and behaved much like *The Authority*. It was clear that this was a response to the ultra-violence and revisionism that had gained popularity in the genre. In the story, Superman finds himself a step behind The Elite at several major international incidents involving terrorists, all of which end with massive loss of life. When Clark Kent points out that Superman could have stopped the violence without such bloodshed, he is rebutted by a fellow reporter; "The world is sick and broken, Kent. The people want someone to fix it, not hand out slogans and bandages. The Age of Superman is over. Viva the Elite." Ultimately Superman is able to confront the Elite, telling them that what they are doing is wrong. As the long-time symbol of the superhero himself, and even recognized within the DC Universe as such, his words

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[66] Geoff Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 137.
[67] Joe Kelly (w), Doug Mahnke (p), Lee Bermejo (p), "What's so funny about truth, justice and the American Way?" *Action Comics*, Vol. 1 #775 (March 2001), DC Comics. The title is a play on both Superman's famous motto, and Nick Lowe's 1974 song, "(What's so funny about) Peace, Love, and Understanding?"

should carry weight, but he is rebuffed by the Elite's leader, Manchester Black. For Black, standing in for the whole anti-hero trope popular in the 90s, the world Superman had imagined was a dream and it is time to wake up; "Masks are for hiding. Capes are for play. 'Villains' don't share their plans before they smoke you – 'cept in campaign speeches. Or the pulpit or in front of the classroom. Reality is a mite bloodier than sitcoms or comics. The greys stretch out farther." Clark retreats to Smallville and finds that, even there, many people appear to prefer the bloodier, grittier superhero than the dream he represents. Eventually, Superman challenges The Elite to a fight, in front of a television audience, to see who really represents the future.[68]

In the story, the Elite challenged a trope in the Superman mythos that had defined the character across a variety of mediums: Superman as moral example, not just exemplar – that you could and should act as Superman would, rather than Superman only serving as an ideal of selfless service. This idea was perhaps best articulated in the 1979 *Superman* film, and voiced by Marlon Brando as Jor-El, Superman's father, in Christological motifs; "They can be a great people, Kal-El, if they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you... my only son."[69] Superman came to Earth, and by showing humans how to integrate power with duty, he tried to lead them by example into being better people. The Elite, through their leader Manchester Black, explicitly reject this; "This isn't about love. It's about removing the cancers that fester in us and flushing them down the toilet. The people don't want babysitters in spandex to slap them on the wrist when they're bad – they want surgeons to cut the ugly bits from them and charge them through the moral nose." For the Elite, superheroes are there to provide the physical coercion necessary to obtain a desired end, nothing more, and certainly not for providing moral example. The ends justify the means: why risk providing a morally just and worthy example and risk the loss of

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[68] In the story Superman fights the Elite, initially appearing to lose easily as he is not willing to cut loose and kill or maim to secure an end result. As smoke settles in what appears to be Superman's demise, he is not there. From out of the cloud of dust he is heard agreeing that he has lost a step, and that maybe he should embrace the Elite's philosophy. In rapid succession, he appears to kill three of the Elite, before lobotomizing Manchester Black. When Manchester Black says that now everyone knows what kind of person Superman is, he reveals that he didn't kill anyone or lobotomize Black; he didn't need to resort to their level to beat them.

[69] The attempt to connect Superman to an American Christ-figure is a regular feature of attempts to examine Superman and religion. See, for example, Anthon Karl Kozlovic, "Superman as Christ-Figure: The American Pop Culture Movie Messiah," *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (2002), http://www.unomaha.edu /jrf/superman.htm.

more lives? Superman ends up facing the Elite, and winning through to his ideals without sacrificing them.

It is not that his ideals are not challenged, drawn especially poignantly by Doug Mahnke and Lee Bermejo in capturing Superman's angst on the night before the showdown. In bed with his wife, Lois Lane, they talk about why he is doing this: "I heard a child tell his friend that he wanted to be in the Elite – Because it would be fun to kill bad guys. Fun to kill." In the end, while Superman keeps his values intact – especially his vow against killing – he has changed, and it is a change with Taylorian features. As Superman states in the dénouement of the story, "Dreams save us. Dreams lift us up and transform us. And on my soul, I swear … until my dream of a world where dignity, honor and justice becomes the reality we all share – I'll never stop fighting. Ever." Superman has gone through a disenchantment, where the meaning that was provided by simply believing in 'American' values is shown to be based on a lie. This enables him, though, to reach through and re-establish the values that he believes in as non-arbitrary and worthy of universal acknowledgement. Dignity, honor and justice are values to fight for, to strive for; they are the basis of strong evaluative goods from which moral judgements are made. Superman, here, has fought through to a Taylorian re-enchantment.

Fighting the malaise of disenchantment is without a doubt the biggest element regarding the five aspects of disenchantment mentioned previously in Superman, but it is not the only one. In regards to re-enchantment, there is a significant amount of overlap with human images of the sublime, which will be touched upon in greater detail in the next chapter. Re-enchantment as a return of the supernatural and magical can also be seen in post-Byrne Superman continuity. Mr. Mxyzptlk is an interesting case here. Mr. Mxyzptlk has a long history in Superman comics, first appearing in 1944. During the Silver Age of comics, Mr. Mxyzptlk's appearance changed, when it was also established he was from the 5$^{th}$ dimension, where magic was rife. Throughout the years he has popped up repeatedly. Since the 1960s his appearances have diminished but not stopped, showing up 12 times from 1975-1986. The year 1986 marks a radical change and reorientation of the character of Mr. Mxyzptlk throughout the Superman lines. This has special significance given Mr. Mxyzptlk's clear connection to enchantment as "spirits, demons, [and] moral forces".[70] He is a cosmic imp, fully willing to bend reality on a whim, such as conjuring a

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[70] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 29.

giant hand holding a pencil and eraser to erase a building to ease his boredom.[71] His ability to manipulate the universe at whim means that he functions as a challenge to Superman's buffered, rational self. As Superman is the buffered self, Mr. Mxyzptlk is the porous threat made manifest and to which Superman has no defence save rationality and logic.[72]

Before 1986, the Mr. Mxyzptlk character was depicted as annoying, but largely benign; a naïve enchantment that was forever outwitted. After 1986, Mr. Mxyzptlk changed, reflecting a loss of innocence in the genre in general. This started with Alan Moore's *Superman* story written shortly before John Byrne took over. The comic is entitled, "Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?" In this "What if …?" story, Mr. Mxyzptlk orchestrates to have all of Superman's greatest foes descend upon him at once, but not for mischievous fun. As he explains to Superman, the difficulty with being immortal is trying to find things to do. For the first 2000 years he tried being inanimate, for the second he was good, for the third he was mischievous, but now he was going to try evil.[73] Even visually he is different, his clothes markedly darker, and more sinister. In subsequent comics post-Byrne, Mr. Mxyzptlk learned about lying from Luthor, and even gave Luthor red kryptonite to take away Superman's powers.[74] As time passed, he also served a different role, being the link between the world of Superman and the world of its creators, breaking down the 4th wall that separates the action on the comics page and the reader.[75] Later, in *Countdown to Final Crisis* which involved the entire DC line of comics, he is linked to

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[71] Bob Rozakis (w), Curt Swan (p), "A Superman's Best Friend is his Superdog," Action Comics, Vol. 1 #467 (January 1977) DC Comics.

[72] In the pre-Byrne Superman era the only way to defeat Mr. Mxyzptlk was to send him back to the 5th dimension from whence he came, and the only way to do that was to have him say or write his name backwards. Post-Byrne, the means by which to defeat him became more arbitrary and dependent upon the imp's whims, until it became easier to simply revert back to the original convention of having him say his name backwards.

[73] Alan Moore (w), Curt Swan (p), "Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?" *Action Comics*, Vol. 1 #583 [part 2 of 2] (September 1986), DC Comics. This two part story also represents the last issue of *Superman* and *Action Comics* before Byrne takes over.

[74] Roger Stern, Tom Peyer (w), Paris Cullins (p), "Mr. Mxyzptlk! In As Good as His Word," *Superman* Vol. 2 #31 (May 1989), DC Comics; Roger Stern, Jerry Ordway, Dan Jurgens (w), Bob McLeod, et al (p), *Superman: Krisis of the Krimson Kryptonite* (New York: DC Comics, 1996).

[75] See especially Louise Simonson (w), Jon Bogdanove (p), "The Death of Mr. Mxyzptlk," *Superman: Man of Steel*, Vol. 1 #75 (January 1998), DC Comics. The "Fourth Wall" is used to describe the invisible, thin and transparent wall that separates action on the page and the reader. The comic book panel is bound behind it by the page, and then on either side and top and bottom by the panels. The '4th wall', as it were, is that which allows us to see the action being taken, and allows us in to witness the action of the superheroes on the page. However, if it is a wall and we can see in, there is the possibility for comic book creators to play with the idea that their creations can also see and attempt to interact with us – they know they are being watched and so act accordingly.

more primal forces of magic, enchantment and trickery, such as Loki, Coyote, and Anansi.[76] Magic and the supernatural, as it becomes more deadly, also becomes more primal. It is no longer individual wizards that threaten Superman, but gods and the very planet itself. In the "Pantheon" story arc in *Superman: Man of Steel* Superman faces off against various older gods who come back to earth.[77] At a different time, he fights through hell itself in order to save the soul of his boss's son.[78] The threat of the supernatural becomes more deadly in this context, as the threat of the supernatural and magic begins to push against disenchanted notions of rationality and the buffered self.

Also significant for the buffered self, however, was the 'dumbing down' of Superman in Byrne's run. Pre-Byrne Superman repeatedly used his intellect and 'super-rationality' in order to thwart villains, or discover incredible alien technology behind the seemingly impossible.[79] While there was an element of camp and *Deus ex Machina* to the stories that saw Superman using 'super-science' to solve his problems, there was little doubt as to both Superman's intellect and its decisive value. He was, after all, a world-class reporter. During Byrne's tenure, though, Superman's intellect became suspect and he appeared far more comfortable throwing a punch than asking a question. But this portrayal of Superman was not uniform. Another DC writer, Marv Wolfman, in *Adventures of Superman*, depicted a Superman who maintained a much greater semblance of intelligence and rationality that had defined his former buffered self. However, when forced to choose between Byrne and Wolfman, DC editors chose Byrne and allowed Wolfman to leave. Superman was allowed to escape from the confines of the buffered

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[76] Paul Dini (w), Keith Giffen (w), Tom Derenick (p), "The Bottled Imp," *Countdown to Final Crisis*, Vol. 1 #23 (November 2007), DC Comics.
[77] Mark Schultz (w), Yvel Guichet (p), Kevin Sharpe (p), "Pantheon," *Superman: Man of Steel* Vol. 1 #126-127 (July-August 2002), DC Comics.
[78] Roger Stern, Jerry Ordway, Dan Jurgens (w), Bob McLeod, Jerry Ordway, Dan Jurgens (p), "Soul Search," Pt. 1, *Action Comics* Vol. 1 #656 (August 1990), DC Comics; Pt. 2, *Superman* Vol. 2 #47 (September 1990), DC Comics; Pt. 3, *Adventures of Superman* Vol. 1 #470 (September 1990), DC Comics.
[79] Eg: Gerry Conway (w), Curt Swan (p), "Amazo's Big Breakthrough," *Action Comics* Vol. 1 #480 (February 1978), DC Comics; Joey Cavalieri (w), Kurt Schaffenberger (p), "The Great Brain Robbery," *Action Comics* Vol. 1 #575 (January 1986), DC Comics; Bill Finger, E. Nelson Bridwell (w), Wayne Boring, Curt Swan, Carmine Infantino, et al (p), *Amazing World of Superman* Vol 1 #1 (January 1973), DC Comics; in this last one shot issue, Superman's intellect is established as part of the heritage of him being a Kryptonian. As their society was thousands of years more advanced than ours, they were able to learn calculus as children, and read by the age of 1. Superman also possesses eidetic memory, which allows him to remember anything he might have seen or heard with perfect recall.

self that keep him in check. He was allowed to become vulnerable, to be porous, in order to gain access to elements of feeling and rage that his prior disengaged self did not possess.

It is interesting in this context to note that two of Superman's most consistent foes have been paragons of intelligence: Lex Luthor and Brainiac. Luthor is a massive intellect with a xenophobic hatred of Superman, but otherwise portrayed as a completely normal human. So central is the normalness of Lex's humanity, and fear of alien influences, that even in portrayals of the character outside of the mainstream continuity those features are retained, often resulting in him being the saviour of humanity. In *Superman: Red Son*, for instance, it is Luthor as the president of the United States who stops Superman from taking over the world. After saving the world, Luthor then goes on to cure cancer, diabetes and every form of inherited illness with a pill, form a new system of government, and even help extend the human life to 800 years. Freed from his obsession with Superman, his intellect is put towards saving humanity from other ills. Brainiac, on the other hand, has a more varied history, though still defined by the concept – as his name would suggest – that the mind is the self. In the post-Byrne Superman, Brainiac originally was the alien Coluan scientist Vril Dox, before transferring his consciousness to Milton Fine at his death. This was only the beginning, as Brainiac soon was forced into a succession of robotic bodies.

The image of a brain in a vat is a trope found across the comics, popular culture, and even philosophy. What is interesting about Superman, however, is the extent, frequency, and implications derived and articulated as a result of such an occurrence. Lex Luthor, dying from radiation poisoning, has a clone of himself made, to which he transfers his brain, spinal cord, and eyes – apparently all he thinks (or the writer thinks) necessary to ensure continued personal existence.[80] There is no discussion of whether or not this really is the same person: the continuity of personal identity is accepted as a given. Likewise, Brainiac continually transfers his consciousness across various organic and computer forms: from Coluan, to a human psychic, android, human clone, android, Doomsday, nanite composite robot, and back to android. What is interesting and pertinent in regards to conceptions of the buffered self and the mind, is that there is no challenge to the idea that it *is* the same person across time. This is clearly not a deep philosophical exploration of the nature of personal identity, but it is reflective of possible deep

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[80] Roger Stern (w), Jackson Guice (p), "Talking Heads!" *Action Comics* Vol. 1 #678 (June 1992), DC Comics.

assumptions *regarding* personal identity and the mind. If a person says they are the same person, share their experiences, personality traits, and memories across various embodied forms, who are we to disagree that they *are* the same person.

The theme of re-enchantment is writ large in the series of comics by Alan Moore entitled *Promethea*, indeed the re-enchantment of the whole of society is a central theme in this series. *Promethea* can and has been seen within the wider view of a societal search for re-enchantment, especially re-enchantment as defined more normally in non-Taylorian terms as "the sensation when one experiences events or circumstances that produce a sense of the mysterious, the weird and the uncanny."[81] Or even simply as, "a return of magic and mystery to life."[82] Re-enchantment, echoing Taylor's claims of it arising out of disenchantment, involves particular strategies for re-enchantment that go beyond a simple resurgence of traditional practices and ideas. As Landy and Saler describe it:

> Amid this unity, diversity is a positive requirement, since as Nietzsche understood so well, the God to be replaced served multiple functions simultaneously. If the world is to be re-enchanted, it must accordingly be reimbued not only with *mystery* and *wonder* but also with *order*, perhaps even with *purpose*; there must be a hierarchy of *significance* attaching to objects and events encountered, individual lives, and moments within those lives, must be susceptible again to *redemption*; there must be a new, intelligent locus for the *infinite*; there must be a way of carving out, within the fully profane world, a set of spaces which somehow possess the allure of the *sacred*; there must be everyday *miracles*, exceptional events which go against (and perhaps even alter) the accepted order to things; and there must be *epiphanies*, moments of being in which, for a brief instant, the center appears to hold, and the promise is held out of a quasi-mystical union with something larger than oneself.[83]

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[81] Lynne Hume and Kathleen McPhillips, "Introduction," in *Popular Spiritualities: The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment*, ed. Lynne Hume and Kathleen McPhillips (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), xv.
[82] Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology: New-Age Spirituality in a Digital Democracy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 32.
[83] Joshua Landy and Michael T. Saler, *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 2.

These are, ultimately, secular strategies aimed at combating the loss felt with disenchantment. Landy and Saler's description is also a blueprint for understanding the fictive world of *Promethea*.

Alan Moore's *Promethea* tells the story of a young woman who, in searching for the unifying threads within literature that speak of a character named Promethea, ends up becoming that character. The original Promethea, as a young girl, escapes persecution by retreating bodily into the world of immaterial imagination. As the physical world of things exist, so too does the immaterial world of ideas much like in a Platonic conception of forms and ideas.[84] Over the centuries, Promethea became a symbol of something greater, something primally feminine. Existing as a symbol and idea, she can manifest herself when she is imagined strongly enough, either through the person doing the imagining, or through someone else. The main Promethea figure in the series, Sophie Banks, writes or recites a spontaneously created poem in order to transform herself into Promethea. Past Prometheas were able to access their powers in other ways.[85] As Promethea the idea, Sophie/Promethea taps into part of the folklore of imagination, which is the source of her power. *Promethea*, the series, is full of allusions to the mystical and supernatural, especially as constructions of the self and imagination. Throughout the series, Moore intertwines images of mythical gods, religious images and ideas, and historical figures to comment on the power and force of human imagination.

At its heart, though, *Promethea* is a story of re-enchantment, the cornerstone of which is the Immateria. For Moore, part of the purpose of *Promethea* was to enable the individual to "cross over the borderline of rationality and be in magic".[86] This approach, as Hannah Means-Shannon notes, indicates the thinness of the boundary which Moore conceives as existing

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[84] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "Weapon for Liberty," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #5 (February 2000), America's Best Comics.

[85] For instance, in one of their incarnations, a comic book artist drew Promethea, drawing her with such passion that he brought her to life and existence through himself. In another, a poet was in love with a woman and wrote Promethea onto her, transforming her by his own self-belief. All of the Prometheas are created by some sort of creative act that transforms an individual into Promethea. For the purposes here, we will be referring to the Prometheas by indicating the person transformed, the main Promethea being henceforth referred to as Sophie/Promethea.

[86] Alan Moore, "Alan Moore at the Magus Conference." Paul Gravett. Magus: Transdisciplinary Approaches to the Work of Alan Moore conference at the University of Northampton. Uploaded June 1, 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrBbeBezezw&feature.

between science and magic, and the ego and psyche.[87] Within the context of the story, Moore describes the Immateria as, "Beyond substance is imagination, the moonlit realm of dream and fiction, sexual fantasy and the unconscious mind. These lunar attributes, the imagination and romance, are the gem-encrusted gateways of the Immateria."[88] Beyond these gateways, the Immateria stretches out further; "Beyond the lunar spheres lies the mercurial domain of intellect and science, of magic and of language."[89] But this, too, is only a part of the whole, a gateway itself into a journey through the immaterial realm of thought that leads to Ultimate Reality. But the Immateria is not only a place or destination, but also conceptualized as a destiny: "Promethea makes people more aware of this vast immaterial realm. Maybe tempts them to explore it. Imagine too many people followed where she led. It would be like a great Devonian leap, from sea to land. Humanity slithering up the beach, from one element to another. From matter to mind."[90] With this great change, though, comes the end of the world as we perceive it; 'We have many names for this event. We call it "the rapture". We call it "the opening of the 32nd path". We call it the awakening, or the revelation, or the apocalypse. But "end of the world" will do.'[91]

It is unclear here, whether or not the use of the Immateria is postulated as a story device, or indicates Moore's actual view of reality. Moore, widely considered one of the most important writers of graphic narrative, once eschewed an atheistic view of the world. After writing *The Watchmen*, listed as 91st in Time Magazine's 100 best novels of all time,[92] Moore stated that he felt at a dead end, that his atheism had taken him as far as it could, but that there were still some questions it could not answer. While writing *From Hell* (a graphic novel about Jack the Ripper), Moore has one of the characters say, "The one place gods inarguably exist is in the human mind."[93] This prompted in Moore a religious turn towards imagination and magic. Moore saw the turn to magic as the next logical step, allowing him to explore the worlds of both science and

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[87] Hannah Means-Shannon, "Seeing Double: The Transforming Personalities of Alan Moore's Promethea and the Ulster Cycle's Cuchulain," *Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2010), 102.
[88] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "Weapon for Liberty," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #5 (February 2000), America's Best Comics.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Richard Lacayo, "All Time 100 Novels," *Time Magazine*, Vol. 166, No. 17 (October 24, 2005), http://entertainment.time.com/2005/10/16/all-time-100-novels/.
[93] Steve Rose, "Moore's Murderer," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2002. http://www.theguardian.com/film/2002/feb/02/sciencefictionfantasyandhorror.books.

the imagination, without seeing any conflict between the two; "I think that one of the benefits of magic is that it integrates the whole of your experience into one way of seeing, one way of understanding."[94] It is especially the power of the imagination, the power to image one way of being rather than another, that influences and makes reality.

This focus on the imagination informs Moore's own religious beliefs, such as they are, centred on the Roman snake-god Glycon. This is not because of any innate belief in the power of such a being extrinsic from the self, but precisely because Glycon is largely accepted as a completely made-up deity:

> But a god is the idea of a god. The idea of a god is a god. The idea of Glycon is Glycon. If I can enhance that idea with an anaconda and a speaking tube, fair enough. I am unlikely to start believing that this glove puppet created the universe. It's a fiction. All gods are fiction. It's just that I happen to think that fiction's real. Or that it has its own reality that is just as valid as ours. I happen to believe that most of the important things in the material world start out as fiction. That everything around us was once fiction—before there was the table, there was the idea of a table, and the idea of a table before tables was fiction. This is the most important world, the world of fictional things. That's the world where all this starts. [95]

*Promethea* then, according to Annalissa di Liddo; "… is first of all Moore's means of expressing these theories, which shape the protagonist's character and the sequence of her exploits. Nevertheless, this work is also an adventure narrative that shares and refashions the superhero tradition."[96]

Drawing upon Moore's religious views, influenced by Gnostic and occult tradition, the image of the serpent is found throughout *Promethea*, especially in the form of the entwined serpents of the caduceus. Indeed, for Jeffrey Kripal it is the key symbol for understanding Moore's esoteric leanings in *Promethea*.[97] It is the image of the Immateria, however, that is

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[94] Chris Richards, "Alan Moore," The Art of Dismantling: A Radical Artisan Collective and Ongoing Interview Series (March 2011) http://www.theartofdismantling.com/2011/03/17/alan-moore-2.
[95] Alan Moore. Interview. Matthew de Abaitua. *Alan Moore: Conversations*, ed. by Eric L. Berlatsky (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 86.
[96] Annalisa Di Liddo, *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 86.
[97] Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics : Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 12-13.

most interesting for us here. As noted, the Immateria is, "…a place where fictions and symbols are all that's real."[98] Intrinsic to this, however, is that the Immateria is described as a shared conscious space. When Sophie/Promethea asks a previous incarnation of Promethea about the separation of one's own imagination and everyone else's, Margaret/Promethea replies; "Of course they do. Just like their house is their own private physical space. But the territory outdoors belongs to everyone."[99] It is telling, then, that at the end of the series even this private physical space is made communal by Sophie/Promethea, welcoming all of humanity together into a mansion with infinite rooms.[100] In the world that Moore creates, the imagination, perception, language and truth are all intimately connected. In such a world, language was created to clothe ideas and make them tangible, but math is a language too. For Moore, even math is a construction of the human imagination - but it also serves to create truth, a shared truth with its basis in immaterial form.[101]

The power and popularity of *Promethea* undoubtedly comes from the talents of Moore's writing as well as the beauty and evocativeness of the artists. However, part of its appeal is due to the fact that it invokes images and ideas prevalent within society and brought together to form an understandable whole. Moore weaves together modern fascination with Gnostic and occult secret knowledge, images of the Jungian collective unconscious, as well as his artistic flare to produce a work of re-enchantment. In *Promethea*, mystery and wonder are reintegrated into a world where the realm of the imagination and thoughts share a porous border with more material reality. However, there is an order to this world, ruled over by various occult and mystical elements that tap in to a deeper collective unconscious. The four elements, the Tarot, astrological planets, male and female, even the tree of life of Jewish kabbalah, provide an underlying order to this wider universe, all leading one to the pursuit of a higher consciousness either in this life or the next. The profane world is shown to be hallowed through and through by the sacredness of the imagination.

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[98] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "Misty Magic Land," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #3 (October 1999), America's Best Comics.
[99] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "Weapon for Liberty," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #5 (February 2000), America's Best Comics
[100] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "Everything Must Go," *Promethea*, Vol. 1 #30 (July 2004), America's Best Comics.
[101] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "Mercury Rising," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #15 (August 2001) America's Best Comics.

All of these elements are alive in Moore's *Promethea* to the point where one wonders if Landy and Saler used *Promethea* as a template for their description of re-enchantment, or if *Promethea* simply expressed in artistic form certain basic leanings of the times. What is interesting is the clear emphasis on the priority of the mind in the construction and shaping of both the imagination and reality itself. This is not a primary enchantment of physical fairies and spirits, but one where fairies and spirits are given existence through the very real power of the imagination. In other words, it is thoroughly *re*-enchanted, making sense only in the context of a Taylorian *dis*-enchantment and rise of the buffered, individual self.

*Astro City* is another very conscious *reconstruction* of the superhero genre. As Kurt Busiek, writer and creator of the series, states:

> It strikes me that the only reason to take apart a pocket watch, or a car engine, aside from the simple delight of disassembly, is to find out how it works. To understand it, so you can put it back together again better than before, or build a new one that goes beyond what the old one could do. We've been taking apart the superhero for ten years or more; it's time to put it back together and wind it up, time to take it out on the road and floor it, see what it'll do.[102]

This whole process of reconstruction is itself premised on breaking down the superhero genre into individual parts, with one of the major parts being the concept of the heroic. Taylor contends that it is precisely the heroic dimension that has been threatened by disenchantment, and one of the desires for *re*-enchantment is to bring back the heroic. This is strikingly similar to the rationale for Busiek's *re*-construction of the genre in Astro City, the deconstruction of the superhero genre having been accomplished by many writers in view of *Dark Knight Returns* and *The Watchmen*. "If you're not going to put it back together again and watch it go," Busiek asks, "what's the point?"[103] This concept and search for a return of the heroic runs throughout the series.

The most striking example of the return of the heroic found in *Astro City* is in its representation of its heroes. Throughout the series there is a very clear use of images to re-instil

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[102] Kurt Busiek (w), Brent E. Anderson (p), *Life in the Big City* (La Jolla, CA: Homage Comics, 1995), 9.
[103] Tasha Robinson, "Kurt Busiek: Man and Superman," A.V. Club, February 14, 2001, http://www.avclub.com /articles/kurt-busiek,13698/.

the sense of wonder on the part of bystanders, but also the hero as model: as something special, worthwhile, and desirable, that connects with the human sublime. The Samaritan and the Confessor are two examples of particular note. The Samaritan, especially, recalls iconic images of Superman, complete with red, white and blue as part of his costume. But unlike Superman, his hair is grey with age, his face containing lines of worry and care, but also wisdom. The Samaritan here is not idealistic, but paternal in the positive sense of the terms, as what one might expect a good father to be rather than an over-bearing, over-protective one.[104] In the most classic image, he appears almost god-like with a halo of the sun around his head, the people looking up – figuratively and literally – to their defender.[105]

The Confessor, who shares the same archetype as Batman, is especially interesting considering the distinct visual differences between the two. Unlike Batman who has grown increasingly dark, both narratively and visually, Confessor is drawn in a different way. While Batman uses the night to accomplish his aims of combating crime and injustice, the Confessor doesn't just use the night but needs it for survival: he is a vampire. While Batman has Bruce Wayne as his alter ego, the Confessor was once a priest, who through human sexual frailty fell victim to a vampire. Batman seeks justice based on vengeance; the Confessor seeks justice based on repentance.

Visually, Confessor plays and reflects light in different ways than Batman. The symbol of the cross on his chest glows with intense light, as if coming from the light of his spirit deep within. Unlike Batman, who seems to often absorb the light into himself, the Confessor's cape and costume plays with the light, capturing and reflecting it from his flowing cape. It as if his own internal goodness, despite the darkness where he thrives, protects him and shields him from the threat of darkness penetrating into his deeper self. The reader works on the principle that his dark costume blends into the dark; it must for him to be able to utilize the dark to his advantage. But the way the light reflects off his costume, marks him as someone special. It is the light and his burning righteousness, not the ever-flowing cape of darkness and shadows of a Batman or

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[104] Noah Berlatsky, "The Boring Daddy of Astro City," The Hooded Utilitarian, May 21, 2013, http://hoodedutilitarian.com/2013/05/the-boring-daddy-of-astro-city/.
[105] Kurt Busiek (w), Brent Anderson (p), Alex Ross (p – cover), "In Dreams," *Astro City* Vol. 1 #1 (Image Comics, 1995): Cover.

Spawn, that represent who he is as a hero.[106] In a reversal of modern incarnations of the Batman archetype, the Confessor is not the night, but uses the night, so that light might shine on in the darkness. Visually associated with darkness and violence, especially through his primal-looking eyes, the light and cross burning on the Confessor's chest serves to re-anchor the character in the heroic dimension

A second key aspect of Busiek's reconstruction of the heroic is its rootedness in everyday life. Busiek's heroes go on awkward, unsuccessful dates, struggle with issues of employment, seek to balance family and work, and struggle with even the simple expectations and obligations of everyday life. Unlike deconstructionist trends, and the proliferation of darker heroes that it engendered, the heroic as innately valuable is never dismissed in Busiek's work. A good example of this comes in the first issue of *Astro City*, entitled "In Dreams". The story focuses on The Samaritan and plays with the notion of flight and its symbolism as a mark of the superhero. Flight might mark and symbolize the power of the superhero, but not the essence of the superhero. First portrayed in 1939, by Namor, the Sub-Mariner, flight was soon attached to many heroes, including Superman in 1943. Perhaps the sense of flight and the sense of wonder it generated can be seen in the tagline of the 1978 Superman movie, "You'll believe a man can fly" – a movie which is also sometimes credited with creating the summer blockbuster. The question Busiek asks is how much time would a hero like Samaritan actually get to enjoy the enchanted freedom of flight on any given day of being a superhero? The answer: a whole 56 seconds, which is a good day. In an interesting twist, where we would normally connect flight and the act of superheroism, Busiek downplays that here. When saving others, time is often of the essence.

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[106] Richard Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, 26-38; Reynolds was one of the first to examine the special relationship between the costume and superhero identity, but certainly not the last. Coogan, in *Superheroes: The Secret Origins of a Genre* (30-39), gives one of the better descriptions of the importance of superhero costumes using McCloud's theory of comic amplification through simplification; 'Moving from realism to abstraction in pictures is a process of simplification, "focusing on specific details" and "stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning'" (30). This stripping-down amplifies meaning by focusing attention on the idea represented by the picture. McCloud explains, "By de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts" (Ibid., 41). The superhero costume "removes the specific details of a character's ordinary appearance, leaving only a simplified idea that is represented in the colors and design of the costume. The chevron especially emphasizes the character's codename and is itself a simplified statement of that identity" (Ibid., 30). As McCloud himself notes regarding the importance of colour in the superhero costume: "Because costume colors remained exactly the same, panel after panel, they came to symbolize the characters in the mind of the reader" (*Understanding Comics*, 188). Without even reading words, it is easy to know the comic a person might be reading simply through a description of the dominant colours associated with the comic: blue, yellow and grey for Batman, for example, and purple and green for the Hulk.

Samaritan must get places as quickly as possible rather than being able to enjoy the freedom of the dream of flight. It is this very dream of flight as freedom, dreamt during the hours of sleep, that bookends this comic book as it bookends a day in the life of the Samaritan.

However, beyond the re-enchantment of the heroic that is in keeping with Taylor's view of disenchantment, Busiek offers a challenge through his portrayal of a more integral porousness and enchantment of life. Rather than making a direct statement regarding the reality of magic or enchantment like with *Promethea*, which falls within Taylor's notions of re-enchantment, *Astro City* shifts the perspective into ordinary life as is a hallmark of the whole series. A key example here is the story entitled "Safeguards."[107] The story itself does not deal directly with the idea of enchantment or disenchantment. Rather, the story is fundamentally about the tension the immigrant feels regarding integration into the broader society, all through the metaphor of whether or not Marta, the main 'point of view' character for this issue, should move from Shadow Hill to Astro City proper. The speech patterns, motherhood stereotypes, as well as the artistic representation of the main ethnic communities of Shadow Hill is suggestive of people of stereotypical Gypsy, Jewish, or Romanian descent. Astro City, on the other hand, with its glittering high-rises and office towers, is a stand-in for idealized modern urban American life.

What is interesting in the context of enchantment, is the pattern of daily life established for an average resident of Shadow Hill in the *Astro City* series. While portrayed throughout the rest of the series as a dark and mysterious place – terms usually associated with magic and enchantment in a disenchanted world – Shadow Hill is portrayed more directly here. Internally, life in Shadow Hill is filled with routine, but a routine with purpose: to keep away the things that go bump in the night - "the world of spirits, demons, [and] moral forces".[108] Waking up in the morning, Marta goes through her daily routine. She checks the wolfsbane in the window-catchers, tapping her crucifix to make sure it is still there. Her door is made of oak, with ash in the frame, two woods long associated with magical, protective value. The sign of *teusz* stands as a ward at the door, Marta herself speaking more words to ward off danger as she passes through. As the sun comes up, the shadows and the very real monsters they contain are slowly pushed back. Marta notes, as she thinks about the world of Shadow Hill and that of the modern Astro

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[107] Kurt Busiek (w), Brent Anderson (p), Alex Ross (p), "Safeguards," *Astro City* Vol. 1 #4 (November 1995), Image Comics.
[108] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 29.

City; "Wolfsbane, crucifixes, signal-brooches, emergency beacons. They have their talismans – and we have ours." She knows the protective properties of plants, and how to talk to ghosts – both learned from her grandmother.

This naturalness and unconsciousness of the belief in a world of enchantment filled with spirits and other forces in this popular genre, may betray a weak or flawed assumption in *A Secular Age*. Taylor's idea of disenchantment and re-enchantment seem based upon a priority of mind, but also conceptions of the body premised on mental representation. He neglects rituals of the body, and how they impact perceptions of the mind. For Marta, the rituals that are part of her everyday life are not just rituals, but are responses to a reality that the rituals help to counter. In the world of Astro City, Brent Anderson (the artist) illustrates a world of spirits and lurking monsters that really do exist. They raise the possibility that a key place to look for primary enchantment are in the rituals of everyday life – in those actions we take to keep unwanted forces at bay. This links us back to the wealth of material regarding lived religion and material Christianity that Taylor inadequately addresses in his analysis. It points to assumptions in Taylor's arguments about the priority of belief without justifying those assumptions against historical and sociological findings to the contrary. Shifting the focus on rituals of everyday life, as is done here in graphic form, might suggest ways in which an 'original' enchantment has not disappeared. That does not mean Taylor is necessarily wrong, but his argument does not account for those very ordinary rituals of everyday life that structure belief and continue to shape our 'conditions of lived experience'.

The X-men series of comics function in many of the same ways as have already been discussed, though with several important differences. Unlike Superman, who was created in response to the perceived need for a saviour of the common person during the Great Depression,[109] the X-men have long been associated with the question of racial and minority rights. This association has expanded since the 1970s to also include feminism and especially LGBTQ issues. "Mutancy," notes Kaveney, "in the Marvel Universe is a free-floating signifier, but a very powerful one, emotionally and polemically."[110] This is also a key part of their appeal; "The story of the X-men is the story of the oppressed and the disenfranchised striking back

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[109] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 10-13.
[110] Kaveney, *Superheroes!: Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Films*, 8.

against their oppressors, so any reader who feels oppressed may relate to the X-men, regardless of the nature of the oppression, or its level of severity."[111]

Created in the 1960s as part of the Marvel push to create more realistic characters, Stan Lee saw within the X-men a metaphor for the tensions revolving around civil rights at the time.[112] Considering this very different soil from which to draw initial strength to grow, Superman and the X-men have very different relationships to reality, which shapes their respective approaches to questions of disenchantment. Superman, as an icon, functions along a more allegorical line in regards to usual storytelling structures. If a writer wishes to explore concepts such as the nature of heroism when faced with death, the strength of the will, or the battle between primal nature and the buffered self, all that is needed is to manufacture a scenario which tests Superman along the lines desired. Whether or not it fits within the main continuity of the comic doesn't matter, as there is a wealth of "Elseworlds" where a constructed, alternate Superman story can take place. As an icon Superman is used quite effectively in exploring concepts; continuity with the main Superman line of comics is often only a secondary concern, what is important is the concept being explored. The X-men, though, already serving as allegory for various minority and civil rights issues, must almost necessarily maintain a much closer connection to reality. If they are understood as outsiders, understood as allegory for various racial and gender minorities, their struggles for integration, acceptance and conflict within society only works insomuch as they reflect society itself. As a result, the creative teams tend to take a very different approach than that of Superman in response to similar questions.

One of the key differences which serve to separate the X-men and Superman series, as a result of their different approaches to the real world, is their respective approaches to disenchantment. More particularly, while the Superman of the 1970s and early 80s featured prominently the positive idea of disenchantment as the rise and strength of rationality, *Uncanny X-men* did not. From 1975, when the X-men returned as a regular series, they never feature a simple view of the power of rationality. This can be seen in the very re-formation of the 1975 team. While Cyclops was team leader, with a heavy emphasis on rationality and a no-nonsense

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[111] Marc Di Paolo, *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011), 219.
[112] Bob Strauss, "Generator X," *The Guardian*, August 12, 2000. http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2000/aug/12/features.

approach, the rest of the team served to balance out that emphasis. The 1975 team featured Colossus, a Russian who was portrayed as compassionate and following his heart; Thunderbird, a Native American who rejected the 'white man's' world; Nightcrawler, the happy-go-lucky German circus performer; the Japanese imperialist, Sunfire; and the Irish, Banshee. Two other characters that serve to balance Cyclop's rationality are: the African, goddess-worshiping Storm, and the impulsive Wolverine. With such a diverse team it was easy for different people to identify with different characters, but it also served to mitigate against a clear cut validation for the rational buffered self, in contrast to the contemporary Superman series at the time.

From an early period, in fact, character conflict was established precisely between Cyclops as hyper-rational, team-oriented, and driven, and several other characters. One chief conflict was established with Wolverine, who was portrayed as being a loner with a dark past, and an impulsive and potentially violent nature. While early issues downplayed the tension, or at least leaned more in favour of Cyclops and the traditional idea of the team, over time this significantly changed, with Wolverine becoming one of the most popular characters in all of Marvel. Yet, in *Giant-Sized X-men* 1, which marked the return of the X-men to regular circulation, it was the conflict with the Native American Thunderbird that captured what would be an uneasy relationship with disenchantment as Enlightenment rationality. With the very first meeting of the character, we are reminded of some of the by-products of that European Enlightenment rationality; "Camp Verde, Arizona: John Proudstar does not like the reservation. He does not like to watch the old ones, sitting slumped against their doorsteps, dreaming dreams of glory long gone. John Proudstar is an Apache -- and he is ashamed of his people."[113] The object of his disdain is clearly established in the next page when the founder of the X-men, Professor Xavier, comes to ask Proudstar to join the X-men; "The white man needs me? That's tough. I owe him nothing but the grief he's given my people." He eventually joins the team, but on his terms. He quickly takes to calling Cyclops, "One-Eye" – a reference to the visor Cyclops wears – and takes the opportunity to dismiss Cyclops whenever he can, the pair of them almost coming to blows by their second appearance together.[114] This conflict serves to set up

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[113] Len Wein (w), Dave Cockburn (p), "Deadly Genesis," in *Giant-Sized X-men* Vol. 1 #1 (May 1975), Marvel Comics.
[114] Chris Claremont (w), Len Wein (w), Dave Cockburn (p), "The Doomsmith Scenario!" *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #94 (August 1975), Marvel Comics.

Proudstar's death in the next issue,[115] but it also served to challenge too simple portrayals of acceptance towards European assumptions of leadership.

As time moved on, the central conflict became less regarding ancestry or ethnicity, and more on the difference between the straight-laced, serious, rational Cyclops, and the impulsive, lone-wolf Wolverine. This conflict, while working on the level of a personality conflict, has remained a constant feature of the X-men series of comics throughout their run. Cyclops and Wolverine don't like each other, and part of what they don't like about each other is their diametrically opposed personalities. As both of them are heroes, it serves well to shift some of the conflict into the realm of the values that they each espouse and represent.

Cyclops, as mentioned, functions as the traditional hero: respectful of authority, a team player, hierarchically organized, and highly rational. He is the traditional hero that would fit as well in a Jane Austen novel or in the tales of King Arthur. But as a result, there is a certain level of entitlement projected onto the character in terms of his expectations – he expects to be respected, valued, and if he works hard, to be a leader. Hard-working, rational, structured, dedicated, and emotionally distant: Cyclops is a model of the Enlightenment ideal. Wolverine, on the flip side, represents the Id – wild and instinctual, held in check by those most tenuous of threads: personal honour and will. Over the course of years, we learn more of his history, his deep connection with honour in the vein of the samurai,[116] and the strength of his will that keeps him going when others would falter and fall. There is a clash of values here, between Cyclops and Wolverine. Initially, in the late 1970s, Cyclops is generally portrayed as in the right, the focus on good teamwork being the key point by which to emphasise that Cyclops is the better role model.[117] But this emphasis begins to fade with Wolverine finally coming into his own with the Brood storyline. In this storyline it is precisely Wolverine's unrestrained, berserker violence that ends up saving the X-men.[118]

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[115] Chris Claremont (w), Len Wein (w), Dave Cockburn (p), "Warhunt," *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #95 (October 1975) Marvel Comics.

[116] Chris Claremont, Frank Miller, and Paul Martin Smith, *Wolverine* (New York; London: Marvel Comics, 2009). This graphic novel, collecting *Wolverine* Vol. 1 #1-4, and *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #172-173, is one of the first attempts to explore Wolverine as a charater in depth, a character which Chris Claremont refers to in the introduction as essentially that of a "failed samurai."

[117] E.g.: Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (p), "There's something awful on Muir Island!" *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #125 (September 1979), Marvel Comics.

[118] See esp. Chris Claremont (w), Dave Cockrum (p), "Beyond the Farthest Star," *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #162 (October 1982), Marvel Comics.

As a clash of values, this particular conflict has a clear winner: Wolverine has become one of the most popular characters in the Marvel universe, alongside Spiderman. On the one hand there is a resonance with Wolverine as a darker, more violent anti-hero in the same vein as with the popularity of Batman. On the other hand, it is significant that over time Cyclops has come to take on more of the features of Wolverine. Cyclops's emotional distance is shown to be more a personality disorder than as a value to be emulated, especially represented by his very sexualized relationship with the fetishized Emma Frost during the 2000s. His lack of emotions becomes less about emotional distance, than an edginess that can be brought to the character to make him more appealing. This is also seen in 2000 when he has to absorb one of the X-men's major villains into himself, letting loose not only a flood of emotions, but a flood of instinctual desires too. In the end, Cyclops, as representing a certain set of traditional, heroic values, capitulates; "When En Sabah Nur was in my head, he spent a lot of time stripping away a few of my illusions about life and about myself. I realized how many of my high ideals as just based on self-interest and self-deception. I denied it, of course. I beat him in the end, like we always do, and I cast him out of my thoughts … But the thing is, I just can't seem to cast *his* thoughts out of *me*."[119] (Italics in original) While Superman wins through in his moment of crisis to a re-enchantment of his heroic ideals, Cyclops gives up, and allows disenchantment as malaise to 'win'. From here on out, he doesn't fight for heroic ideals, but for mutant rights; the fight for ideals is over. In the process, Cyclops and Wolverine even establish a tentative friendship, or at least respect. The rational, here, is seen as façade. It is the instinctual that is understood to provide the real basis for understanding the person.

The instinctual, the irrational, through the figure of Wolverine is seen to have a place and purpose in the functioning not only of the individual, but of society. This has clear repercussions in regards to perceptions of 'humanity's dark genesis,' as articulated by Taylor and discussed in chapter 1. What is interesting here is that in the figure of Wolverine, we have an unhooking of the rational with the heroic. It did not happen immediately within the series, though, with Wolverine initially being a secondary character, and not the primary focus of any story until the 1980s. While his instincts helped him out, his violence was continually shown to be

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[119] Grant Morrison (w), Frank Quitely (p), "E is for Extinction: Conclusion," *New X-men* Vol. 1 #116 (September 2001), Marvel Comics.

problematic, violence itself portrayed as something that should be restrained.[120] Yet, his attitude, distinctive speech, and embrace of the instinctual in opposition to the vast majority of superheroes, made Wolverine stand out. But it is the Brood storyline where he comes into his own, thinking the words that will define him throughout the history of the X-men; "I'm the best there is at what I do, but what I do isn't very nice."[121]

In the Brood storyline, during a trip to space, the X-men are captured by a race of insectoid alien conquerors named the Brood. The Brood are violent, without remorse, even glorying in the kill, and willing to subjugate others without a thought. The way they reproduce is reminiscent of the movie *Alien* (1979), which came out a few years before. Having secured a host, the Brood Queen implants an egg into the host that takes them over, eventually causing a complete, painful physical transformation into a Brood warrior. In *Uncanny X-men* #162, which features no other X-men except in flashback, Wolverine struggles to fight off both the Brood that are hunting him on an alien planet, as well as a Brood egg growing from within. He fights them not with rationality, but allowing himself to be overcome by the *human* animal within. On the first page of the issue, Wolverine states; "I'm crazy y'see -- a berserker, a psycho-killer. That's fact, not truth."[122] Despite this admission, he has attained something none of his fellow X-men have – he is free. The issue frequently shows scenes of suggested violence, and little tidbits of Wolverine's personality, such as a scene where he is being attacked by four Brood warriors at the same time; "They do their best. I do better."[123] In the end, Wolverine stands alone among the X-men, having defeated the Brood warriors that had been sent to capture him, as well as the Brood that had infested him from within.[124] Now he is in the position, through his violence and animal instincts, to save the rest of the X-men.

This connection with the irrational, while widening the scope of what it means to be heroic, also shifted the presentation of disenchantment as malaise within the X-men series. Unlike in Superman, the issue is not so much the loss of the heroic, but what happens when the

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[120] E.g.: Chris Claremont (w), Bill Mantio (w), Dave Cockrum (p), Bob Brown (p), "Dark Shroud of the Past!" *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #106 (August 1977), Marvel Comics; Christ Claremont (w), Brent Anderson (p), "Ou, La, La … Badoon!" *Uncanny X-men Annual* Vol. 1 #5 (October 1981), Marvel Comics; Chris Claremont (w), Bob McLeod (p), "The Hellfire Gambit," *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #152 (December 1981), Marvel Comics.
[121] Claremont and Cockrum, *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #162.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Defeating the latter as a result of his healing factor, admantium skeleton that can't be transformed, and animalistic will.

heroic is presented in a different form. If disenchantment as malaise means the threat of a flattening of life, a certain model of the heroic – a traditional Superman model might be the best way to describe it – is assumed. The means by which the heroic is re-injected into society is not questioned in this traditional view, but it is raised in the context of the X-men series. In the X-men, the success of Wolverine in aiding his companions provides a quasi-validation of Wolverine's violence as a possible heroic path. The issue of disenchantment as malaise is shifted more directly into the moral register: what is the role of the traditional hero who only fights as needed? If violence itself can be heroic – not as instrumental, like the gun-fighters who put down their weapons after freeing the town, but as instinctual, as a necessary and even worthwhile and valid part of who we are - then the traditional interpretations of the relationship between the heroic and violence are challenged.[125] The superhero as moral exemplar, like Superman, no longer functions, or at least there is no longer a necessary connection between the two, because both the rational, idealistic hero, and the violent, instinctual hero are presented *as* hero. In such a situation, the heroic code against killing carries no weight, or rather only carries the weight to the individual who holds it, but cannot serve as a model for all. The question shifts back to the original source of disenchantment as malaise – the individual is presented with too much meaning. The question becomes for the hero: what rules are there now?

The Brood storyline unfolds 3 years before *The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Watchmen*. Those two stories, while influential, did not usher in this perspective but articulated in more complete fashion, elements that were already present. The darker tone to the X-men series as a whole arguably started in earnest at the same time as those other two graphic novels, revolving around the figure of Apocalypse, an ancient mutant and uber-villain, whose purpose in life revolves around a social Darwinist ideology of survival of the fittest.[126] As Apocalypse is the fittest, his role becomes one of ensuring society itself functions in accordance with that principle. Soon after, the stories of violence and disenchantment increase with the Morlock Massacre. An entire subsection of mutant society is massacred, and one of the X-men – the feather-winged

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[125] As David Hatfield interestingly argues, one of the key questions for Superman is that of mimetic violence in the vein of Rene Girard's work on violence and the sacred. Superman acts violently in order to restore justice, but in being violent also gives the power to others to follow his example into violence. What happens then is the inevitable cycle of violence; David Hatfield, "Superman's Revelation: The problem of violence in *Kingdom Come*," in *Superman and Philosophy: What would the Man of Steel Do?*, 142.

[126] Apocalypse first appeared in X-men comics in 1986, in Bob Layton (w), Jackson Guice (p), "Tapped Out," *X-Factor* Vol.1 #5 (June 1986), Marvel Comics.

Angel - left crucified in the sewers.[127] The massacre is perpetrated by the geneticist villain, Sinister, for the sole purpose of wanting to remove 'wild card' mutants from the genetic gene pool.[128] The X-men face off once again against Apocalypse after the Morlock Massacre, with one of their allies willingly siding with Apocalypse and becoming one of his Horsemen. The death of the New Mutant teen, Douglas Ramsey, follows in 1987 when he is shot and killed.[129] By the end of the decade, nine of the X-men travel through the Siege Perilous after defeating The Adversary, a demonic entity of vast magical powers, giving their lives in the process. The purpose of the Siege Perilous is rebirth: to leave a former life behind, and to wake up in a new one. It is as if, after having struggled for a decade with the question of the significance of the hero in a disenchanted age, the best answer is to give up the quest and simply begin again.[130]

It would be easy to dismiss this entire episode as just a minor blip, inconsequential in the larger picture, except that from the beginning of the 1980s until the present, the X-men have consistently remained one of the most profitable lines in the comic industry: more profitable than Superman, Batman, and even Spiderman.[131] Their appeal is undoubtedly a reflection of many factors, including the involved, soap-opera like storylines. But it is hard to imagine they would remain so popular if they did not resonate with trends within the wider society. These trends in the genre of disenchantment continued and even intensified throughout the 1990s. The Legacy virus, which initially only targeted mutants and served as an analogy for AIDS, factored into many storylines during this period, starting with the death of another youthful New Mutant,

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[127] Louise Simonson (w), Walter Simonson (p), "Falling Angel," *X-Factor* Vol. 1 #10 (November 1986), Marvel Comics; also as a result of this storyline, Shadowcat became trapped in phase form, unable to become solid (*Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #211), Colossus was briefly left quadriplegic (*Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #212), and Nightcrawler left comatose (*Uncanny X-men* Vol. #211). Many of the surviving Morlocks escaped to a separate dimension called "The Hill" where they battled every day in a survival of the fittest type environment, eventually emerging as Gene Nation, an aggressive mutant terrorist organization (*Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #292)

[128] Chris Claremont (w), Rick Leonardi (p), "The Last Run," *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #212 (December 1986), Marvel Comics.

[129] Louise Simonson (w), Bret Blevins (p), "Suspended Animation!" *New Mutants* Vol. 1 #60 (February 1988), Marvel Comics.

[130] Chris Claremont (w), Marc Silvestri (p), "The Belly of the Beast," *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #227 (March 1988), Marvel Comics.

[131] George Arnett, "Spider-man: No longer the U.S.'s favourite comic book hero?" *The Guardian*, June 28, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2013/jun/28/spider-man-favourite-comic-book-heros; the article notes the 2012 sales of comics where the newly re-launched Batman series of comics overtook Spiderman comics as the top individual superhero in terms of sales. Both Batman and Spider-man fell well behind the X-men family of comics: Spider-man sold an estimated 49 million copies between 2002-2012, while the X-men had 65 million copies sold in that timeframe.

Illyana Rasputin.[132] The New Mutants become the more militaristic X-Force, exchanging the pacifistic leadership of Professor Charles Xavier for the military training of Cable. Professor Xavier himself becomes his greatest enemy, both in terms of sacrificing his values in psychically lobotomizing his ideological opposite, Magneto, and leaving him in a vegetative state,[133] as well as externally by Xavier transforming into the near omnipotent Onslaught and wreaking havoc on the whole Marvel Universe.[134] In the middle of the 1990s, the dystopian Age of Apocalypse occurred when a well-meaning attempt at preventing one evil by travelling back in time ruptures the entire timeline, bringing out an age when Apocalypse has won. While the timelines are eventually restored, the Age of Apocalypse storyline becomes a dark, dystopic punctuation mark in the middle of the decade.

Disenchantment as malaise, not so much the loss of the heroic, but the loss of trust, culminated in the "Decimation" storyline of 2006. The preceding storyline, "House of M" had asked the question what would happen if mutants were the dominant race on the planet, but it was always just a 'what if' scenario which readers knew would be returned to the status quo. Instead, with the reality-altering Scarlet Witch uttering "No more mutants" at the end of the "House of M" storyline, a population of tens of thousands became a population of 198.[135] Two factors made this event especially troubling. The first, like with the Death of Superman, it was accomplished through editorial decree, rather than happening organically. The Marvel editor-in-chief, Joe Quesada, stated that he wanted to "put the genie back in the bottle" in regards to the mutant population in the marvel universe.[136] Despite still being a minority and facing prejudice, they were not enough of a minority. Added to this, though, was that the genie that was being put back into the bottle was not just the number of mutants in the Marvel universe, but the entire culture that they had created.

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[132] Scott Lobdell (w), Richard Bennett (p), "Going Through the Motions," *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #303 (August 1993), Marvel Comics.
[133] Fabian Nicieza (w), Andy Kubert (p), "Dreams Fade," *X-men* Vol. 2 #25 (October 1993), Marvel Comics.
[134] John Ostrander (w), Terry Kavanaugh (w), Steve Skroce (p), "Turning Point," *X-Man* Vol. 1 #15 (May 1996), Marvel Comics. This was the first appearance of Onslaught in the Marvel Universe, a being that is the direct result of Professor Xavier shutting down Magneto's mind. Ultimately Professor Xavier, the founder and inspiration for the X-men, was found to be responsible for unleashing one of the greatest threats the Marvel universe had faced until that time.
[135] Brian Michael Bendis (w), Olivier Coipel (p), *House of M* Vol. 1 #7 (November 2005), Marvel Comics.
[136] Joe Quesada quoted in Rich Johnston, "No More Mutants by Andrew Wheeler No #1 - Won't You Take Me to Mutant Town?," BleedingCool.com, September 4, 2010, http://www.bleedingcool.com/2010/09/04/no-more-mutants-by-andrew-wheeler-1-won%E2%80%99t-you-take-me-to-mutant-town/.

By the early 2000s, the theme of mutants building a thriving subculture was introduced into the comics. Like various other minorities, the mutants of the Marvel Universe found a way to be proud of their identity despite the dangers that involved, most often resulting in violent acts of discrimination. Not only was an analogy with racial minorities expressed here, but sexual minorities as well. That minority culture ended with the "Decimation" storyline. The metaphor and image of X-men as minorities was replaced by the metaphor of X-men as decimated population, evoking images and the metaphor of the reserve.[137] Combined with the editorial desire that wanted to limit the number of mutants to be used as superheroes by limiting mutants, the decision shifted the focus of the X-men into fantasies of power rather than the project of fostering diversity.

This underlines another key feature of the X-men, disenchantment, and the malaises of modernity. Throughout much of the 2000s, there was an attempt at re-enchantment by bringing back the heroic. However, in the case of the X-men, it always seemed to fall flat. As Jean Grey, the Phoenix, says as she dies in Cyclops's arms; "Live, Scott. Live. All I ever did was die on you."[138] The hope of *X-Treme X-men* to find Destiny's Diaries, written by a person with the power of seeing the future in the hopes of making it better, fails and is replaced by the "E is for Extinction" storyline, whereby the entire island of Genosha, a country of mutants, is destroyed. The fiery energy of *Astonishing X-men* was premised on the idea that what people need are not only heroes to help them but also the re-enchanted idea that, "we have to astonish them."[139] This inspiration was decimated shortly thereafter in the "Decimation" storyline, and the ghettoization of mutants. This ghettoization led the team to search for another location to found a mutant safe haven, relocating to San Francisco, with the support of the mayor. Eventually, the mutant population re-located to an island called "Utopia." The conflict here underscores the malaise that is actually at the centre of the X-men struggles, and it is not disenchantment of the heroic. Rather, in keeping with the original image of the X-men as metaphors for civil rights, the malaise

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[137] E.g.: David Hine (w), Yanick Paquette (p), *Civil War: X-men* Vol. 1 #4 (December 2006), Marvel Comics; Brian Wood (w), Nathan Edmondson, Carlo Barberi (p), "Reservation X," *Ultimate Comics: X-men* Vol. 1 #19-22 (January-April 2013), Marvel Comics. In the latter example the Native/reservation metaphor is made explicit with mutants being forced onto a specific tract of land after a mutant initiates a war with humans and losses.
[138] Grant Morrison (w), Phil Jimenez (p), "Phoenix Invictus," *New X-men* Vol. 1 #150 (February 2004), Part 5 [of 5], "Planet X," *New X-men* Vol. 1 #146-150 (November 2003-Febraury 2004), Marvel Comics.
[139] Josh Whedon (w), John Cassaday (p), "Gifted," *Astonishing X-men* Vol. 3 #1 (July 2004), Part 1 [of 6], "Gifted," *New X-men* Vol. 3 #1-6 (July 2004-January 2005), Marvel Comics.

is more properly political, centred on the issue of identity politics.[140] As the question of civil rights and the role of minorities within society has changed, so has the focus and attention changed in the X-men: they are heroes, but first and foremost they are minorities. In this way the malaise which they struggle to answer has more in common with Taylor's malaise over political involvement and the quest for community in a world dominated by issues of individualism and instrumental rationality, than with a loss of the heroic.

Shifting the issue slightly away from disenchantment, one theme that corresponds well between the X-men series of comics and Taylor's *A Secular Age*, is the idea of the buffered self, and images of the priority of the mind. Such images are rife within the X-men, found particularly in the many and varied images of psychics and their powers throughout the series. Professor Xavier, the X-men's founder, is the most powerful psychic on the planet. Jean Grey, Elizabeth Braddock, Emma Frost and others all have psychic powers and can operate on a whole plane of existence where the mind alone is the only power: the Astral Plane. The examples are too many and varied to note, increasing until Jean Grey can state, echoed later by her daughter; "If I can think it, it's possible."[141] The mind, rather than the soul, is seen as the seat of the human person. What is interesting here too, is not just the emphasis on psychics and the mind, but an increasing emphasis on the role of the will and the power of the self to create a buffer even against people who could enter another's mind.

This is developed particularly in the case of Cyclops. In his relationship with Jean Grey and then Emma Frost, two world class psychics, we see the progression not so much of him becoming a buffered self, but the portrayal of him *as* a buffered self. In the 1980s this was seen through his 'psychic rapport' with Jean Grey, who was his girlfriend and wife: they were so close that they were telepathically connected to one another despite distance. They were consciously porous to one another, but rooted in the buffered self of the mind. Gradually, as disenchantment began to take hold of the X-men line, Cyclops was shown as buffered by his strength of will at being able to retain his identity despite the dominating personality of

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[140] Neil Shyminsky, "Mutant Readers, Reading Mutants: Appropriation, Assimilation, and the X-Men," *Internatial Journal of Comic Arts*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2006), 387-405.

[141] Grant Morrison (w), Igor Kordey (p), "New Worlds," *New X-men* Vol. 1 #128 (August 2002), Marvel Comics; also Chris Claremont (w), Salvador Larocca (p), "Hark How the Bells --!" *X-men* Vol. 2 #165 (February 2005), Marvel Comics, with Rachel Summers using nearly the exact same words; "Telekinesis, Storm, is a function of mind and will. If I can imagine it, anything's possible!"

Apocalypse literally living in his head.[142] Through the portrayal of his relationship with Emma Frost, however, something else occurs. The two are supposedly completely open to each other psychically, so when Frost is attacked by a sliver of the Void – the dark Jungian shadow of the heroic – Cyclops insists on helping. The Void shifts into Cyclops mind, where it is Cyclops will that traps this primal entity in a small black box, inside a locked door, in the infinite mansion of his mind. "I dated the most powerful telepath the world has ever known for, like, years man," Cyclops states in an act of retconning, "You know how hard it is to be a teenage boy and be with a girl that can read your mind? You're gonna have to do better than that."[143] The will of the buffered self, the ability to restrict access to the mind, becomes absolute: if one is strong enough, even the most powerful telepath cannot violate the buffered self. This image of the will, then, implicated as it is in stopping an incredibly powerful entity, becomes a model of the heroic. Taylor's buffered self becomes not only a frame of reference of experience, but something to be actively sought.

One element remains to look at and that is the approach to re-enchantment as magic. Within the X-men series, magic is taken to be largely just another force like any other. As one magic-user states; "Where science ends … magic begins."[144] In this view, magic is not outside the universe, but merely another force – like gravity or strong and weak electronic bonds. The apparent miraculous takes on the appearance of science, in a move not far divorced from other forms of re-enchantment. As Arthur C. Clarke famously stated as one of his three 'laws' of prediction; "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."[145] Magic becomes one more thing that can be measured and analyzed, if we but expand our own consciousness beyond the simple confines of traditional science. In this argument, magic and enchantment are already here, but we have simply lost the ability to see it with our too rational

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[142] Alan Davis (w), Terry Kavanaugh (w), Alan Davis (p), "The End of the World as We Know It (Part 2)," *X-men* Vol. 2 #97 (February 2000), Marvel Comics; Joseph Harris (w), Tom Raney (p), *X-men: The Search of Cyclops* #1-4 (October 2000-March 2001), Marvel Comics. This bonding of Cyclops with one of the X-men's fiercest foes, and the unsettling of the expectations of the world that it brings out, is something that affects the character more explicitly throughout Grant Morrison's run on *New X-men*, allowing for Cyclops and Wolverine to even become closer in the process.

[143] Matt Fraction (w), Terry Dodson (p), "Nation X, Chapter 4," *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #518 (February 2010), Marvel Comics.

[144] Christopher Yost (w), Andrea di Vito (p), "Endangered Species (Chapter 14)," *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #491 (December 2007), Marvel Comics.

[145] Arthur C. Clarke, "Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination"" in *Profiles of the Future: An Enquiry into the Limits of the Possible* (New York, Harper and Row, 1973), 39.

minds: we must learn how to see it again. What is needed is the rationality of an Ichabod Crane that reconciles the world of magic with a rational order within that world.

This attempt at explaining and re-organizing the magical along natural, rational lines extends even into what is more properly the supernatural. In one of the comparatively earlier stories of the X-men, the X-men are confronted by what are first perceived to be demons.[146] It is not long after, however, that the reader finds out that they are not demons, but a race calling itself the N'Garai. While they are still treated and understood in some ways as demons, they are naturalized. The N'Garai rule one dimension among many, a hellish dimension as it were, but still just one dimension, with its own laws and order. In the course of the series we are introduced to many other races and dimensions, each with its own competing political interests and natural laws. One such dimension, shorn from its theological contexts, is Limbo. So far divorced from the theological site, this Limbo is eventually renamed "Otherplace," whose primary inhabitants just happen to entail a variety of demon-looking creatures and species.[147]

All these various dimensions, without exception, are understood to exist separate from each other, though in tandem with the earth. They have histories, political struggles, and conflicts between races the same as earth.[148] One particularly intriguing case is the conflict between the N'Garai, who first appeared in *Uncanny X-men* #96 as demons, only to have the X-men corrected otherwise, and the Ru'tai, the former servants of the N'Garai. The N'Garai are conquerors, threatening various dimensions beyond their own, but in *X-men* #74-75 it is revealed that their own grip on their dimension is slipping because of a religious revolt by the Ru'tai. The object of their religiously inspired uprising is a figure called "Mai'keth" – the undying: a figure of inspiration as he fought the N'Garai, killing many of them, without dying. It turns out the X-men Wolverine is the Mai'keth, which creates complications, as it does further storylines. The Ru'tai, still demonic looking, are used as foils against N'Garai incursions into other dimensions, including Limbo, while retaining their own desires as a "people."[149] While these variations add

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[146] Christ Claremont (p), Bill Mantlo (w), Dave Cockrum (p), "Night of the Demon!" *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #96 (December 1975), Marvel Comics.
[147] Limbo/Otherplace first appears in Chris Claremont (w), Brent Anderson (p), "Chutes and Ladders," *X-men* Vol. 1 #160 (August 1982), Marvel Comics.
[148] Superman comics also feature 'Satan'-like characters in the form of Blaze and Satanus. However, unlike the Marvel universe the Hell of the DC universe is portrayed much more like traditional, singular conceptions of hell rather than relying on the dimensional metaphor.
[149] Chris Claremont, Len Wein, Roy Thomas, et al (w), Thomas Derenick, Karl Waller, Alitha Martinez, et al (p), *X-Men: Black Son* Vol. 1 #1-5 (November 2000), Marvel Comics.

to the storytelling, it is the naturalization of magic and the supernatural into humanly recognized structures that is particularly interesting. Why do demons need to be human-like in the first place? This was not always the case, so this transformation seems to reflect very modern concerns.[150]

There are two elements not yet addressed but that run throughout the four series, raising questions regarding the movement from enchantment to disenchantment. The first is Taylor's notion of disenchantment as a kind of 'de-magic-ment' of society. Superman's "Birthing Matrix" functioned like an artificial womb, keeping Superman safe until he came to earth, as well as resurrecting him after his death.[151] Cellular robotic 'nanites' are a constant threat to the X-men, working as they do at a cellular level to destroy and challenge the cellular identifies of mutants.[152] Even the relatively simple 'hover boots' of a second-rate villain of Astro City, the Junkman, works as a pseudo-scientific/magical effect.[153] All of these and more the reader takes for granted in stories across media. We willingly suspend disbelief. As none of these super-technological phenomena exists, a question we may ask is why are we so willing to believe they could?

These pseudo-science objects function by some vague principle that might be ephemerally understandable – such as miniaturization in the case of nanites - but their real power does not seem to come from their possibility in reality, but the aura of authenticity surrounding them. We observe the miniaturization of electronics around us all the time. We have an idea of what big machines can do. Therefore little machines, even working at the level of the cell, might someday do anything that we could imagine another machine could do. But it is not clear if this is deduction, or taking leaps and bounds in the suspension of disbelief to believe in something

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[150] This dimensional conception of hell is not reserved to the X-men line of comics, or the Marvel Universe, but can be seen in various manifestations throughout popular culture. The dimensional nature of hell was perhaps most widely utilized in the two television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its spinoff, *Angel*. In both of these, the main characters visited various hell dimensions, giving a visual context for a different world that was not based upon religious notions of demons-as-supernatural evil, but as more secularized inter-dimensional beings with a different moral code and existence. This is quite opposite to Taylor' claim, a claim prevalent within academia, that hell has disappeared from modern consciousness. If modern popular culture is any indication, hell has not disappeared from modern consciousness, if anything it has enjoyed a resurgence in the last few decades.

[151] Dan Jurgens (w, p), "Resurrections," *Superman* Vol. 2 #81 (September 1993), DC Comics.

[152] Grant Morrison (w), Frank Quitely (p), "E is for Extinction," *New X-men* Vol. 1 #114-117 (July-October 2001), Marvel Comics.

[153] Kurt Busiek (w), Brent Anderson (p), "Show'em All," *Astro City* Vol. 2 #10 (September 1997), Image Comics.

else. There is not a machine on earth currently that can re-write the genetic code, but that is what we are expected to believe is possible when the X-men discover, in one storyline, that the colds they think they have are actually nanites sent to break them down at a cellular level. This makes a vague sense to us, but not because we understand any of the science behind it, but because of the accepted authority of the science that has come before.

These examples point to an interesting feature frequently noted in literature regarding re-enchantment, but seldom phrased in response to particularly Weberian notions of disenchantment and causation. Barry Taylor, in *Entertainment Theology*, notes; "The reenchantment of the world is linked to our use of technology. The access to the fruits of modernity, the age of scientific rationalism, is what allows us ultimately to reenchant our lives."[154] This aspect of technology, the science of technology and enchantment, feature prominently especially in literature regarding modern media; 'Our high-technology world is essentially a magical one. … In both television drama and documentary, plausibility, verisimilitude, the suspension of disbelief are the key ambitions, the key achievement. In this, television identifies itself as the supreme magician, the mistress of the "as-ifs" of contemporary culture.'[155] In this view, science and technology are connected to magic and the enchanted by way of function: science and technology functions in similar ways to magic in the way that they create a sense of wonder, and are used as a way of showcasing the incredible. Special effects, based on modern science, help to intensify this connection in modern media especially in the last 20 years.[156] The ability of comics to create "special effects" has long been a feature of comics, even contributing to its initial popularity in the 1940s.[157] While there is an emphasis on special effects and technology in producing a re-enchantment of the world, Taylor's Weberian disenchantment also points towards a possible deep enchantment at work.

If disenchantment is at least in part a question of causation – a movement away from a vertical causation resting on hierarchy – then does that mean most non-specialist's understanding of science is more properly understand as 'magical'? The non-specialist does not rely upon

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[154] Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology: New-Edge Spirituality in a Digital Democracy*, 30.
[155] Roger Silverstone, "Television myth and culture," in *Media, Myths, and Narratives: Television and the Press*, ed. James W. Carey (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988), 27.
[156] Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 108-109.
[157] Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 183-184.

cause and effect to believe in the possibility of nanites, but rather the authority of others—the authority of science and technology. There will undoubtedly be the challenge that what is happening here really is the logical process of deduction: we are extrapolating to particular cases based upon what we know to be true. This is a valid point within the field of philosophy and logic, however, that is not what Taylor claims as his project in *A Secular Age*. The question has to be: what fits better to account for the 'conditions of lived experience'? How do we live and experience within the Immanent Frame? Do we experience special effects such as nanites, accept their effects on the human person, as a result of a disenchanted, horizontal causation? Or, is it because we trust that science knows what it is talking about and somehow conceives of the scientific project as a higher form of knowledge – like alchemy was in the 1500s? The question, ultimately, cannot be conclusively answered here, as there are elements of both perceptions that appear correct. It does, however, seem to suggest Taylor's firm rejection of forms of still existent primary enchantment may not be as secure as Taylor would suggest.

Another intriguing element not addressed by Taylor but running especially through the longer X-men and Superman family of comics, is our porous vulnerability to time. This is not a vulnerability to old age, but to time itself as a force against which the self as self has no protection, especially no protection against time's power to alter the self. Within the Superman series of comics, there are the Linear Men, charged with protecting the time stream and ensuring that time moves in one direction: from the past into the future.[158] Yet their presence and even the need for people to protect time suggest a deeper fear of the malleability of time: that time, despite appearances for our 3-dimensional way of thinking, is not linear. *The Kingdom* by Grant Morrison and Mark Waid, which serves as a prequel of sorts to *Kingdom Come*, draws this out more explicitly in its conception of hyper-time; "The vast, interconnected web of parallel timelines which comprise all reality," going on to note, "the problem with the Linear Men is that they're too linear . . . They think orderly, catalogued continuity is preferably to a kingdom of wonder."[159] As Scott Bukatman notes; "Refusing to accept the singular reality imposed by DC, and adapting the multilinear and multiverse reality of the pre-Crisis DC Universe, Morrison and

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[158] E.g.: Dan Jurgens, "The Linear Man," *Adventures of Superman* Vol. 1 #476 (March 1991), DC Comics.
[159] Mark Waid, Alex Ross, et al, *The Kingdom* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 1999), 226. This storyline actually marked the introduction of hypertime, moving the DC universe away from a purely linear conception of time, more in keeping with the current cultural anxiety regarding time.

Waid created parallel, yet self-contained, worlds and punctured exit and entrance \ passageways between them."[160] Despite our best efforts, the implication is drawn that our linear conception of time that buttress a certain conception of self, is not as stable as would appear.

This uncertainty regarding time is especially seen in the X-men, who struggle frequently around issues of time. The pseudo-scientific magic of time travel enables someone to go back in time, where they try to right a wrong, only to watch as the world unravels. At one level this makes for good stories and good morality tales: don't try changing the past, because you might end up with something worse. What it doesn't answer is the question of why we might find those stories interesting.

In this vein, one issue that stretches throughout the X-men series, especially gaining force in the 2000s is the issue of precognition and prophecy. Indeed, the *X-Treme X-men* series that ran from 2001 to 2004 was centered on this particular concern. A mutant with precognitive abilities had set her visions down in a number of diaries, which the X-men wish to retrieve so they would have knowledge about events that were to unfold. But even with the end of *X-Treme X-men* in 2004, this issue regarding knowledge of the future continued to pop up throughout the story lines. It plays a factor in the pursuit of a way to reverse the effects of the Decimation storyline.[161] It appears in physical form in the existence of a wall that has the ramblings of another precog, guarded by pacifists who will allow themselves to die because that is what the future tells them will happen.[162] It is even given the veneer of science by having government agents casually talk about precognition, the ability to see into the future, as an obvious and accepted part of reality – as obvious as the space station with gleaming metal and advanced electronics that serves as a backdrop for the discussion.[163]

The storyline where this last scene takes place might give an indication of what is occurring within the larger prevalence of temporal representations found in the superhero genre. The storyline revolves around another planet having a prophecy that in the far future a particular mutant will destroy their world. In the present, their prophecy is confirmed by the precogs in the

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[160] Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity*, 280.
[161] Mike Carey (w), Humberto Ramos (p), "Blinded by the Light," *X-men*, Vol. 2 #203 (November 2007), Part 4 [of 5], "Blinded by the Light" vol. 2 #200-205 (August-December 2007), Marvel Comics.
[162] Ed Brubaker (w), Salvador Larocca (p), "The Extremists," *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #487-191 (August-December 2007), Marvel Comics.
[163] Josh Whedon (w), John Cassaday (p), "Torn (Part 2)" *Astonishing X-men* Vol. 3 #14 (June 2006), Marvel Comics.

space station: a mutant will destroy an alien planet, and it is one of the X-men. It is this feeling of inevitability, though, that seems to strike precisely at the buffered self. If the rise of the buffered self brought about the rise of the rational individual, able to determine itself as an individual, time as inevitable prophecy threatens all of that. The self is not buffered if it is porous to an outside force that it has no control – if it is vulnerable to, and cannot control, time. While Taylor addresses the buffered self in history as past, he has not taken into account the frame of experience in the world also operating in the direction of becoming.

Concerning time and the buffered self, Alan Moore's own conception of time provides a particularly interesting account.

> I've come to think that the universe is a four-dimensional site in which nothing is changing and nothing is moving. The only thing that is moving along the time axis is our consciousness. The past is still there, the future has always been here. Every moment that has existed or will ever exist is all part of this giant hyper-moment of space-time. If you think about a standard journey in three dimensions -- say, being in a car driving along a road, the houses you're passing are vanishing behind you, but you don't doubt that if you could reverse the car, the houses would still be there. Our consciousness is only moving one way through time but I believe physics tells us all those moments are still there -- and when we get to the end of our lives, there's nowhere for our consciousness to go, except back to the beginning. We have our lives over and over again.[164]

Whether or not one agrees with Moore's conception of time, it represents a threat to the conception of the buffered self articulated by Taylor. In Moore's representation, the self is completely porous, cast adrift on the ocean of time. There is no buffered self. Or rather, that is the fear of the buffered self: that it is not buffered after all.

In this chapter we have examined Taylor's idea of disenchantment, testing it through the lens of the superhero genre. For Taylor, disenchantment is used to describe a key condition of the modern self. As such, Taylor is less concerned with a precise tracking of the historical development, whereby we moved from an enchanted to a disenchanted age, to our experience already living in that thoroughly disenchanted context. In such a world, divorced from prior

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[164] Alan Moore, "When I first heard about virtual reality I thought: is there any other kind?" *Newstatesman*. June 17, 2011. http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/helen-lewis-hasteley/2011/06/alan-moore-novel-jerusalem.

conceptions of meaning derived from hierarchical notions of our place in the cosmos, the self generates meaning from within the self. This gives force to Taylor's own notion of the rise and strength of the buffered self against the dangers of the enchanted world, but also the lingering worry that too much was sacrificed to create the buffered, disenchanted self. We can't go back to that previous enchanted time, though, so instead there are attempts at re-enchanting an already disenchanted world.

By and large, many aspects of Taylor's exploration of disenchantment, disenchantment as malaise, re-enchantment, and even the buffered self in modernity seem largely confirmed within the superhero genre. Much of the *Superman* series, as well as *Astro City* and *Promethea*, deal with the malaise of disenchantment by exploring re-enchantment in various registers. For the *Superman* line, that requires winning through to a sense of the heroic despite the world around it. For *Promethea*, it is in conceiving of re-enchantment as a product of the human imagination, and its ability to change the world and consciousness. For *Astro City*, it is the re-enchantment of the heroic as both products of the everyday, but also things to look up to model your life after. For the *X-men* line, however, there is disenchantment as malaise, seeing the traditional attempt to retain the heroic as largely a failure. All of these superhero lines are premised on a buffered self: an individual defined in some ways by will and its ability to create and maintain a buffer between itself and other aspects of reality.

While there is much to confirm Taylor's view of disenchantment within the superhero genre, there are significant problems within the certainty and normativity Taylor assumes that the modern self is living in a completely disenchanted context. The ghosts of enchantment, though, still seem to haunt the modern self. We can see this in the ease by which supernatural elements of an enchanted world view are accepted as a given, especially within the context of the *Astro City* and *Promethea* series. The rituals of the body, associated with both objects and actions, retain memories that seem to point beyond the rational and disenchanted. Superstitions still abound, especially in sports and rituals of bodily safety, that give rise to questions regarding the absoluteness of Taylor's claims regarding disenchantment. The easy acceptance, too, of pseudo-science within the superhero genre, also gives pause to easy assumptions of a clear, rational, disenchanted, horizontal cause-and-effect dominating our experience of self in the modern context. Pseudo-science seems premised less on the power of cause-and-effect, than on an 'enchanted' world of vertical authority, even if that authority rests on disenchanted science.

There is an opening here, in the context of disenchantment, accepting of significant portions of Taylor's theses, but unsure if they tell the whole picture. There seems to be something missing from Taylor's analysis regarding disenchantment/re-enchantment. For the historians that critiqued Taylor's presentation of disenchantment, this might seem hardly surprising. Taylor seems to present a rupture with the past that is too definite, too absolute even when speaking in the context of the modern 'conditions of lived experience'. It is interesting in this context that Victoria Nelson writes; "many of today's subgenres affirm an underlying and pervasive supernaturalism … thereby bringing them closer in spirit to the cultural products and popular religious imagination of the medieval Gothic period" than that of the Romantics.[165] In this context Taylor has missed something: the sense of the Gothic that unites the medieval, with the eighteenth century, and the present. One important feature of the Gothic is its transformation of the sublime.

[165] Victoria Nelson, *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 8.

# Chapter 5
# - The Sublime

In response to the dilemmas of disenchantment, Taylor posits two features that have become particularly potent sources of energy and understanding for the modern self:

> Where our ancestors used to see their world as the locus of spirits and forces, and understood it as a fixed, ordered cosmos, we experience the universe as limitless, that is, unencompassible in imagination, but only at best in highly abstract theory, which is beyond most of us; and we feel it to be changing, evolving. Where our ancestors were able to ignore without difficulty the signs which point us to these two features—vastness and evolution—they stand out for us. This is not just a matter of regnant *theories* affirming these features—although that is obviously part of the reason for the change. It is also a matter of the way we see and experience things. [Italics in original][1]

In the enchanted world, space was established and known through our position in the Great Chain of Being. It provided an orientation, giving meaning to the self. Likewise, the enchanted sense of time was dictated by the rhythm of the seasons, festivals, and the greater rhythms of life like birth, marriage and death – all providing a clear sense of the ritual, cyclical nature of time. As modern cultures broke from this enchanted world, there was a need to find new sources of orientation and meaning. Without an order to the cosmos, with all creatures and physical spaces having an established place, the wilderness became much bigger, mysterious, and vast beyond imagining. This fostered a temptation to retreat into the self, away from the task of needing to find our way in an infinite universe; infinite both in space, but also in meaning. In a universe that is infinite, there is no centre, no meaning, save that which the self generates. Yet in being able to comprehend the vastness of the infinite, sensed especially for Taylor in the image of the wilderness, the self found a sense of meaning, power, and orientation.

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[1] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 347.

While Taylor links the two sources arising from disenchantment – vastness and evolution – he spends considerably less attention on the issue of vastness – the sublime – than he does on the link between the self and our evolutionary past. As Taylor writes, "My thread in the above discussion has been the sublime. But we can see how the Viconian dark genesis of humanity opens up an analogous kind of depth, and a relation to the non-human reality out of which we emerge. And in fact the eighteenth century follows Vico, though not necessarily under his influence, in probing the mysteries of human evolution."[2] Taylor goes on to note how the vastness of the wilderness prompted a turn to the depths of the human animal found within nature; "The rediscovery of what I really am within is made possible by the resonance I feel with the great current of nature outside of me."[3] Indeed, beyond the chapter entitled "The Dark Abyss of Time" there is little engagement with the moral source of the sublime, seeming to suggest its replacement by time and humanity's dark genesis as the critical loci of development in the construction of the modern self. The cross pressures and tensions Taylor identifies within the modern self in the later chapters of *A Secular Age*, focusing on issues of violence and sexuality, draw almost exclusively from this evolutionary dimension of the search for the connection between the self and human genesis.

The problem with this approach, though, is that it appears to neglect large aspects of the modern 'conditions of lived experience,' in particular the sublime and its impact upon the self. In this chapter, we will endeavour to take the core of Taylor's description of the sublime and follow it into the current age. Stripped to its roots, Taylor's sublime offers a moral source of action derived from this recognition that one dwells in a universe with dark depths and infinities. The sublime functions as an orientation point outside the self, which allows one to find and orient themselves on the larger map marked by excesses that transcend the boundaries of the buffered self. By locating oneself on this map, they are able to move and break through a narrow self-absorption that threatens to stultify action in the face of too much meaning. As the core of Taylor's sublime, these trajectories can also be pushed forward into our current historical context, moving beyond Taylor's focus on the 1700s, though still within his larger construction of the sublime in *A Secular Age*. In pushing through Taylor's discussion of the sublime into the post-1960 context, certain limits can be seen. One major weakness is the failure to adequately

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[2] Ibid., 343.
[3] Ibid., 344.

account for the darker side of the sublime seen in the rise of the monstrous as an aspect of the sublime in the 20th century.[4] This 'monstrous' element of the sublime pushes against the boundary of the buffered self, resulting in a far more fragile buffered self than would first appear.

One of the components of most traditional presentations of the sublime, is an acknowledgement of the rhetorical roots of the concept in classical literature. Taylor, however, focused on developing the modern narrative and frames of experience, does not refer to those roots at all. Taylor never mentions the Greek thinker Longinus, who is often credited with influencing the development of the idea. As most scholars note, Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) was influenced by Longinus' style, even as Burke moved away from classical understandings of the term.[5] For Longinus, there were five basic sources of the sublime: "grandeur of thought," "treatment of the passions," "figures of speech," "dignified expression," "majesty and elevation of structure."[6] In the context of the early modern period, Burke took Longinus' focus on thought and the passions and sought to develop the element as the underlying root of the sublime. However, as Philip Shaw points out, and relevant to Taylor's argument, Longinus' rhetorical sublime was also influential in offering individuals the possibility of conceptualizing the sublime as separate from transcendent sources; of making it possible for the sublime to operate within an immanent context.[7]

Taylor is much less interested in drawing out a traditional history, however, and instead focuses on tracking a narrative that gave rise to the immanent frame and the modern 'conditions of lived experience'. In this context of Western European thought since 1500, which is the focus for Taylor's study, he conceives the sublime as serving to raise the self out of a "too-rosy picture of the human condition."[8] Unhooked from former, enchanted conceptions of space, which provided a definite hierarchical organization to the self in the context of an ordered cosmos, there

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[4] Slavoj Žižek probably goes farthest in connecting the sublime and the monstrous in the 20th century, explicitly linking Kant's suprasensible moral law with the monstrous; "its sublime majesty turns into abhorrent monstrosity." ("The Unconscious Law" in *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 2009), 219).
[5] E.g.: Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (New York: Routledge, 2006); J. Jennifer Jones, "Beyond Burke's Precedent and Back Again: Longinus and the Romantic Sublime," *Neophilologus*, July 10, 2014.
[6] Longinus, *On The Sublime*, trans. by H.L. Havell (London: MacMillan, 1890), 13.
[7] Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*, 12-26.
[8] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 338.

was a movement towards a conception of an infinite universe that decentred the human subject from any definitive place and orientation. Suddenly finding itself adrift, there is a temptation to narrow the focus to the self rather than attempt to find meaning in the vast universe. In such a view, meaning is found in the pursuit of life and property, but also closed off from anything that threatens a happy, easy view of existence; "We are tempted to draw the limits of our life too narrowly, to be concerned exclusively with a narrow range of internally-generated goals. In doing this we are closing ourselves to other, greater goals."[9] What we need is to open ourselves up to the wider world; "We need to have our petty circle of life broken open. The membrane of self-absorption has to be broken from the outside, even if what liberates is internal to our more authentic selves."[10] That is where the sublime as moral source comes in: as providing the source of energy to restructure our lives on larger, more encompassing views of the world and our place within that world.

The sublime is not identical to traditional notions of transcendence, but a source of inspiration unique to modernity. Indeed, according to James Elkin, the sublime could have only occurred given the conditions of early modern Europe, and so holds no transhistorical value.[11] The modern sublime, for Taylor, acts as a catalyst to move us beyond the confined limits of the buffered self: "The moral meaning of the sublime can vary with the different views about what is our higher purpose, but in its general form it fits into the self-perception of buffered selves engaged with merely human goods that they stand in danger of narrow self-absorption."[12] It is in this context that the sight of 'Excess' breaks through our consciousness and re-structures our understanding of our place in the universe. Taylor notes in this connection that the attraction to the wilderness by Europeans during the 18th and 19th centuries was not a call *to* the wilderness, to live within the wilderness, but rather "it communicates or imparts something to us which awakens a power in us of living better where we are." The 'Excess', the vast unutterableness of the sublime, allows us to take note of where we are, helping to locate us within a larger map and territory. In doing so it makes us better situated – both in understanding and moral character – to

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid. It is interesting in this connection that Taylor seems to be trying to preserve the buffered self even here against the threat of porousness to the outside, by evoking not a spatial metaphor of orientation, but an orientation even further inwards.
[11] James Elkin, "Iconoclasm and the Sublime," in *Idol Anxiety*, eds. Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhaft (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 144.
[12] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 338-339.

embrace our role within society. "The praise of the wilderness didn't imply that it offered an alternative site for a better life. Its importance was that it put us in touch with something greater, which we could easily lose sight of."[13] This something greater might be God, but it could also be our moral vocation in the case of Kant, or even "our capacity for heroic affirmation of meaning in the face of a world without telos" which occupied later thinkers according to Taylor.[14]

For Taylor, "Part of the sublimity of wilderness consisted in its otherness, its inhospitality to humans; in the fact that you couldn't really live there. But opening to it makes it possible for you to live properly outside of it."[15] The focus, connecting with disenchantment, is on providing a way for us to understand our place without relying upon traditional notions of a Great Chain of Being. However, three key problems arise. First, Taylor minimizes and in many ways intellectualizes the emotive aspects of the sublime and certainly the terror noted by Burke and others. According to Taylor, Burke's sublime primarily evoked a feeling of delight, which is at odds with Burke's own emphasis on terror, power, and astonished horror. [16] Second, Taylor focuses on the wilderness-as-sublime of the early modern period, but largely neglects movements and developments in the notion of the sublime that made the idea of the sublime and its outward orientation an important philosophical influence in the 20th century. And third, people *did* in fact live in the wilderness which Taylor describes, particularly the American wilderness of the 18th century which is one of the key sources of Taylor's description of the sublime. In the American context, different than the European, it was necessary to transform the inhospitable to the hospitable, and develop strategies to cope with the 'Excess' along the way, leading to a different approaches to the sublime.

It is not possible to dwell in depth on the history and influence of the sublime on Western culture and modern thought, but it is necessary to draw out some of the larger streams that arise out of the development of the idea of the sublime for their possible contribution to Taylor's modern 'conditions of lived experience'. In this way, too, we can trace some of the key components neglected or minimized in *A Secular Age.* Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical*

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[13] Ibid., 341.
[14] Ibid., 339.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 338.

*Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) was the first to break apart the categories of the beautiful and the sublime, identifying the sublime with a certain intensity of emotion. As Emily Brady notes, it is the focus on the creation of an emotive experience that is one of the hallmarks of Burke's contribution to the idea of the sublime.[17] For Burke, while beauty was ruled over by pleasure, self-preservation and the terror it evoked was "the ruling principle of the sublime."[18] Indeed, astonishment as "that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror," was the highest expression of the sublime, whereby the "mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it."[19] This was a darker, more violent conception of the sublime than had been developed by other thinkers. As Samuel Monk suggests, this darker conception was influenced by the fascination in late 18th century literature with graveyards, the supernatural, ruins and decay.[20] At the heart of the sublime, though, were orientations to power; "I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power."[21] And that power was most often seen in moments where the individual was confronted with a vastness and infinity beyond their reckoning – both in terms of height and grandeur, but also the infinity of the infinitely small.[22] It is important to note, though, unlike Taylor who largely confines the sublime to landscapes in *A Secular Age*, for Burke, the sources of the sublime are also found in the primordial howl of a wolf, and "serpents and poisonous animals of almost all kinds."[23]

By and large Taylor downplays the emotional aspect of the sublime in order to focus on the sublime as moral source, as a source of action and orientation. In this way, Taylor sees both Burke and Kant focusing on the sense of threat to personal safety as a necessary condition for the sublime, as producing an "agreeable frisson" for the self.[24] However, this feeling is not the goal for either Burke or Kant, as Taylor maintains, but an opportunity to break out of a narrow self-

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[17] Emily Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 28.
[18] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 58.
[19] Ibid., 39.
[20] Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: a Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 88.
[21] Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 64.
[22] Ibid., 72-75.
[23] Ibid., 57.
[24] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 337.

absorption of the self into a wider, more encompassing perspective. The purpose of Burke's writing on the sublime, Taylor writes, is that the feeling of terror and pain produce delight, which then awakens the discernment of the finer organs.[25] According to Taylor, one of Kant's purpose in developing the idea of the sublime is that it "awakens an awareness of ourselves as noumenal beings, who stand as high above all this merely sensible reality, as within the sensible realm the threatening phenomenon stands above our puny phenomenal selves."[26] Distance from real danger is necessary for the self, so as to provide a 'higher vision' of a higher purpose;

> The sight of "Excess", vast, strange, unencompassible, provoking fear, even horror, breaks through this self-absorption and awakens our sense of what is really important, whether this be the infinity of God, as with Burnet, our supersensible moral vocation, as with Kant; or, as with later thinkers, our capacity for heroic affirmation of meaning in the face of a world without telos—the truth of eternal recurrence.[27]

Yet, linked with the mind, feeling, and imagination, Kant also notes the violence done particularly to the mind in its powers of comprehension.[28] The sublime, then, is intimately connected with violence and fear. It breaks through a narrow self-absorption to attempt to encompass both the joy and exhilaration of the self before the sublime, but also the sublime as terror and violence. Kant, however, does not follow through with this element of the sublime, and focuses instead, according to Taylor, on our suprasensible moral agency.[29] As Richard Kearney notes, while Kant may not have pursued the ramifications of the violence of the sublime, many philosophers in the 20th century were not so reticent.[30] By introducing notions of the monstrous and violence into the sublime, however, Kant prepares the way for a sublime that disturbs more than it settles.

Jean-Francois Lyotard emphasized the importance of Kant's conception of the sublime as that which cannot be represented in order to account for much of modern and post-modern art. For Lyotard, the sublime "may well be the single artistic sensibility to characterize the

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[25] Ibid., 338.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., 339.
[28] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, trans. by Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 141-143.
[29] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 346.
[30] Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 97.

modern."[31] James Elkins notes the importance of the term 'sublime' in modern theories of art, even as he argues for its historical contingency as a product of developments in early modern Europe.[32] Beyond the purely aesthetic, the notion of the sublime was also employed by Rudolph Otto in his *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (1924). Otto used the idea of the sublime to develop his idea of the numinous. For Otto, both the numinous and the sublime, borrowing from Kant, refer to something that can be felt but not defined.[33] But whereas the sublime has a moral quality for Otto which he borrows from Kant, the purpose of the sublime being to awaken our moral awareness as rational creatures, the numinous exists without any concomitant connection to morality: it is the experience of the 'wholly Other'.

The idea of an encounter with the 'wholly Other', that which takes us out of a narrow self-absorption into an encounter with something beyond the self that characterizes the sublime, is also utilized by an important stream of thought within 20th century philosophy. Arguably first articulated in Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (1923), the idea of the Other is founded upon the idea of the encounter of the self faced with the recognition of something radically outside the self, confronting it, but also giving it a new orientation. As Buber notes, "The You encounters me by grace – it cannot be found by seeking. … The You encounters me. But I enter into a direct relationship to it. Thus the relationship is election and electing, passive and active at once."[34] The idea of Otherness is taken up and developed much further in the work of Emmanuel Levinas who posited the profound debt the self owes to the other, a debt that is infinite as the other gives to the self its very identity.[35] The recognition of the other is terrifying, prompting the self to want to murder the other, but it is precisely the face of the other that commands "thou shalt not kill," drawing us into an ethical relation. This, the ethical relation, is prior to all other ontology, and is the beginning of philosophy and understanding for Levinas.[36]

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[31] Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," *Art Forum*, Vol. 22, No. 8 (April 1984), 38.
[32] James Elkins, "Iconoclasm and the Sublime: Two Implicit Religious Discourses in Art History," 145-146.
[33] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. by John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1957) 41.
[34] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 62.
[35] Bernhard Waldenfels, "Response and Responsibility in Levinas" in *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzek (New York: Routledge, 1995), 45.
[36] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Adolpho Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 47.

Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Paul Ricoeur make use of this idea of a sublime radical alterity within their own works. The idea of our moral responsibility to the other is central to many of Derrida's works, especially in his attempts to grapple with the idea of the gift and the stranger. Paul Ricoeur, while ultimately rejecting Levinas' emphasis on the radical alterity of the other, is still crucially concerned with the ethical relationship established between the self, the other, and a third. This is especially drawn out in *Oneself as Another*; "I have always known that the other is not an object of thought but, like me, a subject of thought, that he perceives me as other than himself, that together we intend the world as a common nature, that together, as well, we build communities of persons capable of behaving."[37]

Julia Kristeva's work on the abject plays most directly with the idea of the sublime, seeing the sublime as originating in the abject – in the boundary between object and subject. As that which is outside the social order, it implies that it was once inside the social order, and that something happened to take it out – to make it Other. Bodily wastes such as sweat and feces recall this disgust, but also generate a fear and nausea that the spilt between the self and others are not as absolute as one might imagine. That split is only skin-deep as it were: the buffered self is always reminded of a basic porousness.[38] Images of ruin and decay, first noted by Burke as sites of the sublime, are understood by Kristeva as sites of the abject: "The horror of something grand fallen into nothingness, dissolved beyond usefulness, decayed to its primeval corpse-self, is the territory of literature where Kristeva finds the greatness of abjection."[39] This is the place of monsters and of maternal aliens lurking to challenge constructions of a bounded, buffered self. The image of the mother becomes one of the most threatening images for the self, for she holds within herself the reality of a primal, prior porousness before all later constructions.

It is impossible to go into detail here on the various uses of the notion of the sublime in the 20th century, and also unnecessary at this juncture. The purpose above was to note the profound impact that the sublime, and notions of the sublime as that which orients the individual

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[37] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 332.
[38] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1-3; One can also draw a connection here between Kristeva and Bakhtin in their focus on bodily waste as sources of the grotesque, but that also spark a sublime awareness of the self. See, for example, Mary J. Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1-16.
[39] Mike Walker, "Julia Kristeva's Abjection: A Lecture on the Powers of Horror," *Coal Hill Review*, Ed. by Christine Stroud (Pittsburgh: Autumn House Press, 2011), October 26, 2011, http://www.coalhillreview.com /?p=3423.

beyond the self, have had on various important thinkers and fields of thought in the 20th century. These are orientations outwards, evoking spatial metaphors and concerns that Taylor otherwise identifies as part of the sublime. Aesthetics, ethics, and religious studies have all been impacted by this approach and continue to explore concepts related to the sublime as that which orients us within the universe. Such thinkers as Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy, Rudolph Otto, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Slavoj Žižek, Paul Ricoeur, and Richard Kearney – all important and influential thinkers – make use of the sublime, or images of Otherness reminiscent of the sublime, in their work and thought. These are not tertiary theorists in contemporary academic discourse, yet these modern figures are largely absent in *A Secular Age*, or used in ways that largely neglect their own interest in the sublime.[40] Taylor, instead, is interested in a different reading of the history of the sublime in *A Secular Age*.

Against the lines established by Kristeva and others within the 20th century, while Kant notes the violence of the sublime turned monstrous, he did not pursue the ramifications.[41] Many 20th century thinkers have not been so reticent. Kearney notes a 'third movement' of the sublime, moving beyond Kant, that focuses on horror, abnegation, and the monstrousness of evil;

> In the realm of the sublime, the upwardly transcendent finds its mirror-image in the downwardly monstrous – or what Kant called 'radical evil'. Both extremes are so marked by the experience of radical alterity that they transgress the limits of representation; and for several postmodern authors like Lyotard, Kristeva, and Žižek, the two sometimes becomes virtually *indistinguishable*. In this schema, the monstrosity of horror is just as 'ineffable' as the vertical transcendence of God (invoked by Levinas and the negative theologians). There is, in short, an apophasis of the monstrous as there is an apophasis of the divine.[42]

This element of the monstrous is likewise lacking in Taylor's analysis.

Beyond philosophers, Kearney notes, such a view has also taken root in certain populist neo-Gnostic views that embrace the monstrous sublime's transgression of good and evil. Joseph

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[40] A prime example of this is Taylor's focus on Derrida work almost exclusively as a form of Neo-Nietzschean theory, with no attention given to Derrida's treatment of the stranger, hospitality, the gift, or even his very nuanced explorations into the question of evil. While Taylor is not interested in examining Derrida closely per se in *A Secular Age*, it is still striking that large segments of Derrida's work are ignored.

[41] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 136.

[42] Richard Kearney, "Evil, Monstrosity and the Sublime," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (2001), 489.

Campbell is representative here when he notes, "By monster I mean some horrendous presence or apparition that explodes all your standards for harmony, order and ethical conduct … That's God in the role of destroyer. Such experiences go past ethical judgements. Ethics is wiped out … God is horrific."[43] This is not an encounter with the depths of a dark genesis within, but an 'Excess' and vastness external to the self, pushing up and threatening the power of the buffered self to maintain its boundaries. Kearney also notes the modern fascination with aliens as blurring the distinction between Gods and demons – with interesting implications for Superman and superheroes in general.[44]

Transposed along Taylorian lines, the monstrous can be seen in the context of the sublime as an outgrowth of this moral source. This connection of the monstrous as linked to the sublime – as providing an orientation beyond the self – is not new, but can be seen in earlier periods, especially in connection with conceptions of the transcendent. As David Williams notes in his study of medieval conceptions of the monstrous, 'the very idea of the monster as "thing" functioning as monsters as "sign" confirms its relation to the sacred, for as far as the Middle Ages is concerned, only the divine can use signs.'[45] The purpose of talking and thinking about monsters and the monstrous in the medieval context was, for Williams, to "raise the mind to a higher level of the perception of the real."[46]

Within the context of the Immanent Frame, though, moving from medieval enchantment to modern disenchantment, the understanding of the monstrous changes.[47] This medieval turn to the monstrous in exploring the ineffability of the absolute good is very different from conceptions of the monstrous in modernity which function to challenge aspects of the buffered self. As with Taylor's use of Burke and Kant, the sublime functions at a distance, creating pleasurable 'frissons', which initiate reflection that take us out of a narrow self-absorption – a constant threat for the buffered self. As a moral source, arising from disenchantment, Taylor ties

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[43] Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 222.
[44] Kearney, "Evil, Monstrosity, and the Sublime," 499.
[45] David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: the Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 12.
[46] Ibid., 16.
[47] Williams' last chapter here is instructive, as he notes the ways in which Enlightenment rationality, and the science borne of it, attempted to push the monster and the monstrous to the sideline. Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, 323-331.

the sublime to the evolution of the buffered self in modernity: reflection on the sublime functions, in diverse ways, to shape and refine buffered sensibilities.

However, as Kearney, Campbell, and others have noted, and as previously mentioned, there is another side of the sublime as articulated in the last century, namely the sublime that refuses to acknowledge the barriers created for it by the buffered self. This form of the sublime demonstrates its monstrosity by pushing back against the constructed borders of the buffered self. Monsters and the monstrous challenge established categories of the self, as "they stand for no thing and no reality other than themselves."[48] As with the sublime, following Taylorian lines, the main function of the monstrous is to burst through a narrow, self-absorption of the self. This is a 'darker' side of Taylor's sublime that is not fully addressed in his account.

There have also been developments within the notion of the sublime itself, particularly the modern development of urbanization and industrialization that also bear more particularly upon Taylor's conception of the sublime as wilderness. While Taylor notes the affection for the wilderness many people have, he fails to note the impact of a much greater movement *towards* the city and the urban setting that has structured much of the modern experience of the last few centuries.[49] As wilderness shrank away, both literally due to the growth of cities and figuratively with the rise of the power of cities and lack of opportunity to escape, people were put in greater contact with others and in greater numbers. Packed into cities, they were confronted with a greater breadth and width of humanity than ever previously anticipated. The sounds, sights, and odour of the cities and factories competed with the sounds, sights, and odours of the people who lived there. The works of Dickens, Melville and Gaskell seek to capture some of this reality. Acts of great charity and sacrifice expose what the human person is capable, but they are offset by acts of darkest depravity.

Out of this context arose arguably the first example of the phenomenon of the modern serial killer, in Jack the Ripper, who stalked London in 1888, and the modern fascination with

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[48] David Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, 11.

[49] Taylor references suburbs and travel into the country as evidence that we still desire this wilderness sublime, noting "all [of] these are features of our world." (349) Taylor then goes on "Travel, both to beautiful countrysides, or beaches, or wilderness areas, has become just about universal in our culture. There are no classes or groups where lots of people don't either go, or want to go." (350) While one can question this assertion, especially Taylor's subsequent claim that millions of North American own second residences in the country, it perhaps is more usefully challenged on the simple grounds that an equally large number of people travel to the *city*.

such characters.[50] The opposite of Taylor's emphasis on the minds of artists and writers is the modern repellent fascination with the mind of criminals and serial killers, a unique feature of the urban landscape, easily seen in the wealth of television programs and movies devoted to exploring the criminal mind.[51] The recent cult hit *Dexter* even made the serial killer into the protagonist who serially kills serial killers. This repellent fascination with criminality and urbanization is detailed nicely in Caroline Picart and Cecil Greek's edited work *Monsters In and Among Us: Toward a* Gothic *Criminality*. In this work they make explicit the link between our modern repellent fascination with criminality and the Gothic; 'The ongoing fascination with evil, as simultaneous repellent and irresistibly attractive, in Hollywood film criminological case studies, popular culture, and even public policy, points to the emergence of "Gothic criminology," with its focus on themes such as blood lust, compulsion, fear, godlike vengeance, and power and domination.'[52] More often than angels, monsters stalk the shadows of the urban landscape. For the Schillers and Woodworths that occupy Taylor's interest in understanding the development of the modern self during the 1800s, this period is also the time of Shelly's *Frankenstein* and Polidori's *Vampyre*.[53] The human becomes both sublime and monstrous; sublime *because* it is monstrous. Drawing upon Taylor, it is a human sublime "provoking fear, even horror, break[ing] through this self-absorption" in order to "awaken our sense of what is really important."[54]

If there is a 'Gothic' element missing in Taylor's treatment of the sublime, there is also a lack of attention given to the particular American context that forms part of the North Atlantic Western world Taylor is examining. Taylor identifies the 1700s as a period which witnessed the rise of European interest in the American wilderness. However, he ignores the conflicting presentations in European literature of the American wilderness and the American people. At the same time as there was a rise and romanticization of the experience of encountering the vast,

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[50] Alan Moore, creator of *Promethea*, also created the acclaimed graphic novel *From Hell* about the Jack the Ripper murders.
[51] Examples of such fare include: *Psycho*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Monster*, *American Psycho*, *Perfume: the Story of a Murderer*, *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*, *Criminal Minds*, *CSI*, *Bones*, *Dexter*.
[52] Caroline Joan Picart and Cecil E. Greek, "Introduction: Toward a Gothic Criminology," in *Monsters In and Among Us: Toward a Gothic Criminology*. eds. Caroline Joan Picart and Cecil E. Greek (Madison : Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 11.
[53] Franco Moretti, "The Dialectic of Fear," *New Left Review*, Vol. 136 (Nov-Dec. 1982), 67-85; Moretti notes that Frankenstein and Dracula – the monster and the vampire – are both totalizing monsters, drawing upon opposite fears born of Industrialization: the disfigured wretch and the ruthless proprietor.
[54] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 339.

untrammelled American wilderness, there was a concomitant rejection of the literature focusing on the tale of frontier heroes around 1800.[55] In wake of the French Revolution, the barbarism of humanity was laid bare for the European mind: there was no need to seek a 'frisson' of barbarism, which the stories of the frontier heroes offered, when you had experienced the real thing. The tragic European Romantic hero took the place of the American frontier action hero for the learned European. The Romantic Hero of a Chateaubriand, for example, yearns for the hunter's – the man of action – contentment, but knows that it is an illusion breed of simplicity; "The noble poet-hero embodies human aspiration: the frontiersman speaks at best for provincial, dull peace and at worst for a stultifying complacence."[56] The Romantic Hero can envy the naïveté of the frontiersman, precisely because he is the frontiersman's superior. The hunter, who was to become the model for the American hero, was for the European the most degenerative form of American character: the action of the hunter was premised on violence, which could not be controlled or reconciled with a peaceful society.[57]

In this context, Richard Slotkin's work on the American frontier is very useful. His *Regeneration Through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, identifies a different approach to the wilderness and underscores a divergence in attitudes between Europeans and Americans. This difference also ultimately impacts perceptions of the sublime. Using Philip Wheelwright's three stages of mythic development, as mentioned in chapter 3, Slotkin notes that for much of the early modern period Europe continued to employ myths for primarily Romantic reasons: for the fulfilment and maintenance of societal obligations. In North America, however, confronted with the need to understand and adapt to a new land and way of being, myths were needed that '… cut through the conventionalized mythologies to get back to the primary source of blood-knowledge of the wilderness, the "Indian" mind, the basic, Moiratic, myth-generating psychology of man.'[58] As Slotkin states; "American hero-figures and metaphors for the American experience were not so much derived from postulations about nature as they were from extended experience in the wilderness. The French required mediating figures

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[55] Ibid., 333-348.
[56] Ibid., 392-393.
[57] Ibid., 267.
[58] Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 17.

like the good savage and good Quaker as a philosophical necessity. For the colonists, mediating figures were the sine qua non of their continued health."[59]

The reason for this divergence in development was that European and American writers were dealing with different issues and concerns – different stages of mythological development, according to Slotkin – and produced literatures that responded to these cultural variations. Europeans, in the wake of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, "employed American types to dramatize social and abstractly philosophical issues."[60] On the other hand, "The American myth-maker, in order to satisfy the demands of his audience, had to turn to consummatory myth-making in his approach to the frontier. He had to evoke the primary, mythopoeic consciousness of the people in order to establish a new faith, a new sense of cultural identity, and new basis for moral order."[61] In the context of the U.S., the concern was motivated by a need to create a national identity that spoke to their own experiences, not European expectations. Out of this context arose the figure of Daniel Boon into a national icon: a thinker, but a certain kind of thinker that could act vigorously and quickly when the need arose, and not be weighed down by Romantic melancholy.

The figure of Daniel Boon became the subject of various fictional narratives, but was first brought to prominence by John Filson's "The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon" in 1784. According to Slotkin, what made Filson's Boon special was its ability to bring together the various strands of American mythic heroes into one coherent, identifiable character for the American public. Filson's Boon combined, "the heroic attributes of the several hero types that had already emerged from the several genres of Colonial writing: the explorer, the naturalist-surveyor, the farmer, the military hero, the captive, partially adopted by the Indian, and the hunter of beasts and men."[62] For the European, the buffered self kept the wilderness out, while in the American context the buffered self willingly brought the wilderness within, but on its own terms. This is a subtle but important difference, serving to underline what might be seen as a more basic challenge to Taylor's thought. As Taylor notes, "The idea here is that our existence, or vitality, or creativity depends, not just on the inhuman outside of us—for instance, on the

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[59] Ibid., 205.
[60] Ibid., 371.
[61] Ibid., 370-371.
[62] Ibid., 267.

overwhelming power of raw nature which awakens heroism in us—but on the wild and pre-human in us which resonates to that alien external power."[63] Taylor's conception, following upon European tradition, keeps the boundary of the buffered self intact: the wild remains externally wild as it 'resonates' with that wild part of us within, but does not penetrate the buffered self. The American model, however, allows for the buffered self to become 'strategically' porous in order to generate not just a 'resonance', but a real connection between the sublime and the self.

Slotkin locates part of this difference in the different reactions and treatment of the moral implications of the wilderness. For the European, the wilderness was conceived in moral terms founded upon Christian moral implications of the wilderness. The wilderness of the Exodus and the temptations of Christ were not someplace one lived, but a place that was endured. According to Slotkin, in the American narrative there was a rejection of the Eden myth which saw in the move to the wilderness a fall from grace and exile. Rather, drawing partly on Native myth, the wilderness served as a womb: an opportunity to move the person from a child-like state into adult maturity.[64] Far from being a fall, the move and embrace of the experience of the wilderness revealed a movement into a higher, more mature state of being; "Acceptance of the hunter as the archetypal American hero reversed these values. It meant adopting the hunter's anti-intellectualism, his pursuit of the material and ephemeral, and his love of exploit and violence for the sake of their blood-stirring excitement."[65] This all occurred under the growing mutual disenchantment between the old and new worlds at the turn of the 1800s.[66]

As a result of this divergent history American culture engages the sublime in ways that Taylor largely ignores. During the time period Taylor examines in regards to the sublime, the European mind was fascinated by the American wilderness for its untrammelled sublimity, but had no interest in the rough, boorish people who lived there. But for the American, the capacity to enter into, engage, and respond to the power and the sublimity of the wilderness was part of the construction of national (and self) identify and mythology. For both Europeans and Americans, "landscape description was a major interest, and nature was functioning in literature

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[63] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 346.
[64] Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 307.
[65] Ibid., 307-308.
[66] Ibid., 347-348.

as a godlike agent for the regeneration of man."[67] The difference in underlying attitudes, however, led to different perceptions of the moral source of the wilderness sublime. The European intellectual tradition that Taylor traces in *A Secular Age*, sees in the sublime an external source challenging the buffered self, calling out to the depths of humanity's dark genesis, establishing a resonance between the self and the external, wild, vital world. In the American model, by contrast, the sublime can be found both externally and internally: there is no fear of taking the vastness of the wilderness and its dangers within oneself as a source of power and regeneration.

Building upon the differences between European and American context, a similar though broader transition can be seen. As David Nye notes; "The English were prone to view industrialization in terms of satanic mills, Frankensteinian monsters and class strife". By contrast, "the Americans emphasized the moral influence of steam, and often sought to harmonize nature and industrialization."[68] This difference in approach can be tied to Innis and Carey's observations regarding the transmission model of communication. The transmission model of communication, as noted in chapter 2, is focused on communication as extended through space. Considering the need to control and manage a wide area of territory such as the United States or Canada, a form of communication was necessary that linked wide geographical areas together. Transmission models of communication are linked to space, but also to economics and industry. As the transmission model of communication was emphasized in the United States as a positive dynamism, there was also a current that identified industrialization in the same way, thus giving rise to the Industrial and Urban sublime: in the fascination for the capacity of Industrialization such as seen in a Hoover Dam, as well as an awe of Urbanization seen in such tourist destinations as Las Vegas and New York City.

Since *Terminal Identity: the Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (1993), Scott Bukatman has taken the idea of a technological sublime and applied it not just to landscapes but to the technologies themselves that produce moments of bodily sublime transcendence. Cinema, amusement parks, and even comics contribute to creating this effect. Rather than simply looking at a skyscraper and imagining the expansive freedom of flight, amusement park rides allow our bodies to actually feel what it might be like to fly. The American experience was not one

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[67] Ibid., 208.
[68] David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 54.

external to the body, but one taken into and felt through the body itself – through its energy and vitality.[69] Focused on bodily experience, form plays a crucial role that is too often overlooked;

> critical studies of visual or time-based media all too frequently fail to consider issues of form with the sophistication routinely brought to bear on literary objects. Hence, differences among media are elided through a reliance on (or faith in) highly linear narrative structures as the overriding, deterministic, and teleological locus of "meaning." Objects involving multisemic forms of address are routinely reduced to their narrative "functions" or, worse, the stasis of narrative "closure." While it is acknowledged that there is something more in these entertainments, that "something" has frequently been tarred or celebrated under the rubric of "excess." The term is misapplied. These entertainments do not exceed *themselves* but rather the arbitrary conditions of narrative's hierarchical dominance (or, similarly, the bounds of linguistically based signification).[70]

Contra Taylor, the sublime as 'Excess' for Bukatman results when the experience of something overflows our ability to enclose it within a prior narrative system. But this is based upon a prior assumption that everything can be enclosed within a narrative, rather than allowing for multiple and malleable forms of understanding. According to Bukatman, the technological sublime sees in the malleability and plasticity of the human body expressions of new forms of the sublime. Musicals, which seek to capture the lightness and fluidity of the human form, the Western which is often marked by extreme bodily exertion and constantly threatened with exhaustion, and the plasticity of the comic book – what Bukatman calls the plasmatic – are key sources of this bodily technological sublime only made possible by the development of new media forms.[71]

Along these same lines, as many scholars have noted, there is a close connection between the city and superheroes. Many superheroes are intimately connected in the imagination with particular cityscapes. Superman protects the gleaming, modern Metropolis, Batman patrols the dark and shadowy Gotham City, Spiderman swings through the streets of New York City. The popular image of Spiderman, swinging from building to building, could not exist without the skyscrapers giving a distinctive vertical dimension to the city (not to mention a place for his webbing to stick to). Indeed, it is interesting that almost invariably superheroes until the 1970s

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[69] Scott Bukatman, *The Poetics of Slumberland: Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 3.
[70] Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity*, 5.
[71] Scott Bukatman, *The Poetics of Slumberland: Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit*, esp. 182-211.

dwelled in the city: they could have lived in the suburbs, outer space, or the jungle, but superhero adventures took place in the city. The gleaming city of tomorrow offered in New York City's 1939 World's Fair came out in the same year the Man of Tomorrow, Superman, received his own comic. As Bukatman notes, "Superhero narratives thus comprise a genre that joins World's Fairs, urban musicals, and slapstick comedies in presenting urban modernity as a utopia of sublime grace. These comics dream impossible figures in ideal cities."[72] He goes on a few pages later to draw an even more evocative connection between superheroes and the city:

> The superhero city is founded on the relationship between grids and grace. The city becomes a place of grace by licensing the multitude of fantasies that thrived against the constraining ground of the grid. Grace is a function of elegant precision but also implies a virtuostic transcendence of the purely functional, and the city thus possesses a grace of its own. Superheroes are physically graceful, but they are also graced through their freedom, their power, and their mobility. Superhero comics embody the grace of the city; superheroes are graced by the city. Through the superhero, we gain a freedom of movement not constrained by the ground-level order imposed by the urban grid. The city becomes legible through signage and captions and the hero's panoramic and panoptic gaze. It is at once a site of anonymity and flamboyance. Above all, soaring above all, the superhero city is a place of weightlessness, a site that exists, at least in part, in playful defiance of the, spirit of gravity.[73]

Bukatman might be going too far to see within the superhero and the city the ideal, as the city functions in various ways within the genre. Gotham can hardly be considered an 'ideal' representation of a city, even as it defines Batman and threatens to overwhelm the reader in its Gothic sublime shadows. As Matthew Costello and Kent Worchester note, "The distinction between Superman and Batman, for example, hinges not only on their different powers and origin stories, but on their incompatible assessment of the costs and benefits of urban life. The superhero genre rehearses and revisits long-standing debates about modernity and urbanity to an extent that is rarely true of other popular genres."[74] While the connection between the superhero and the city began to become challenged in the 1970s on the one hand, through such series as the

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[72] Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity*, 185.
[73] Ibid., 187-188.
[74] Matthew Costello and Kent Worcester, "The Politics of the Superhero," *Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2014), 86.

X-men which took the team very consciously to various locales, that traditional connection was also the source and inspiration for several works throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Busiek's work in *Marvels* as well as *Astro City* focused on the connection between the city and the superhero, supplemented by Alex Ross's and Brent Anderson's visuals, which were themselves influenced by early World's Fair posters. [75]

Applying the foregoing to the study at hand, we will be looking for instances and representations of the sublime that draw out an awareness in relation to place and orientation in space, as well as images of vastness as a source of power to shake us out of complacency. Borrowing from developments in the idea of the sublime that move beyond that of 18th and 19th century European high culture, we will look for the sublime in urban and technological landscapes, as well as the wilderness. Crucially, following Bukatman and others, we will also look for the sublime within the human form itself: both in its monstrous manifestations, as well as in its more archetypal images. In this connection, we will need to be particularly aware of the orientation of these images, namely if they attempt to strike an internal resonance, or function as an external threat to the buffered self. The question of the buffered self looms in the background throughout this analysis. Notions of the sublime, as coming from outside the self, can threaten the boundary and buffer of the self that Taylor describes by pressing in upon that boundary. How the buffered self responds to that pressure can give us indications as to the strength and fragility of its boundaries.

In the context of the earlier discussion regarding the differences between American and European myth-making in the 1700s, it is interesting that various scholars point to the superhero as operating to fulfil the same functions as a Daniel Boon or Davey Crockett, but in the context of the 20th century. Here too, though, there is recognition of the difference between American and European needs. This is well-articulated by Clare Pitkethly, in her examination of recurring elements of the superhero narrative. As with many forms of literature and identity formation,

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[75] *Promethea*, too, is a homage to the urban sensory landscape as much as it is to the Immateria. Within the 'real world' of the story, the action always takes place in a sensory overloaded urban environment with multiple messages and images constantly playing throughout the scenery, playing with the idea of the lights and neon pervasive in the cityscape.

"Superhero narrative is driven by a desire for unity, and the pursuit of a stable identity."[76] However, the superhero narrative is also driven by lingering tensions born out of their birth within the American, postcolonial context; in a fusion of the binary antagonism of European literature, and the desire to integrate and bring together a more encompassing whole.[77] While there is a desire to stretch the bounds of the self to encompass more, to be open to a strategic porousness, there is still the need for an external orientation to drive both the self and the narrative forward; "The incorporation of difference, however, ultimately hits a wall as an inassimilable limit is encountered. This limit takes the form of the Supervillain … By encountering an excess that is so inconceivably *Other* (evil) that it is unable to be dialectically subsumed into a greater whole, the Superhero finds an external limit by which to define his or her identity against."[78] In this way, both the figure of the superhero as well as that which pushes against the boundary of the superhero, both the monstrous supervillain and the superhero-turned-villain, serve as sites of a sublime orientation of the self, and key sources for our study.

Turning to the figure of Superman, there are three primary aspects that can be seen in the comic book character as orientations of the sublime: Superman as ideal to strive for, Superman as alien outsider, and Superman as monstrous. As Richard Kearney notes, the alien Other occupies a liminal space in our postmodern unconscious.[79] As 'monsters' they, "are liminal creatures who can go where we can't go. They can travel with undiplomatic immunity to those undiscovered countries from where no human travelers – only monsters – return." They are "…our *Others par excellence*. Without them we know not what we are. With them we are not what we know."[80] As alien other, sent by the heavens or darker regions, the alien threatens the safety of the human status quo. This tripartite expression of the power of the 'alien' – as ideal, monstrous, and outsider – is exemplarily expressed in the foundational superhero narrative of Superman.

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[76] Clare Pitkethly, "The Pursuit of Identity in the Face of Paradox: Indeterminacy, Structure and Repetition in Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2012), 218.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., 219.
[79] Richard Kearney, "Others and Aliens: Between Good and Evil," in *Evil After Postmodernism: Histories, Narratives, and Ethics*, ed. Jennifer Geddes (New York: Routledge, 2001), 101-113.
[80] Richard Kearney, "Terror, Philosophy and the Sublime: Some Philosophical Reflections on 11 September," *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2003), 28.

While many of Superman's most iconic poses are angled in such a way that the viewer occupies a place lower than Superman, suggesting we must look up to the Man of Tomorrow, he is also often perceived within the DC universe as the embodiment of certain values. As embodying the ideals of 'truth, justice, and the American way,' Superman is often portrayed as representing the sublime in ways that inspire people to go beyond themselves; to strive for ideals that are in themselves 'absolutely great', and the source of strong evaluations. As an iconic figure, he is used as a vessel in order to represent various ideal forms often articulated as archetypal. Depending upon the context, though, certain features of that archetype will be stressed over others. For some, the archetype is that of the saviour figure, come to rescue humans from themselves and show them a better way. Alternatively, he is represented as a cultural protector, there to defend a people from those who would threaten them. Within this same figure, though, he is also seen as providing a gateway into an immanent counter-enlightenment occult tradition, as well as a model for a human potential narrative. As archetypes, all of these conceptions are often expressed in semi-theological and religious language.

Superman as saviour, popularized through the Christological orientation of the first *Superman* movie,[81] is often an optic used by Christian writers in approaching the Superman character. Superman is not of this world. He is sent here by his father. He is raised as a human but knows there is something more to him. He has powers and abilities greater than humans. He has a particular pro-social mission that seeks the goodness in all humans. He has died and risen again. He has (repeatedly) saved humanity from itself, and in his example tried to live in such a way as to provide a different model for human living. All of these mimic very closely the Christian conception of Jesus. "Superman is not Jesus Christ," as Stephen Skelton writes, "But he is a Christ figure, a figure resembling Christ—as we all should be."[82] Superman in this way takes within his form certain ideals, and then becomes a model of those ideals. However, critics of the Superman-as-saviour archetype do not hesitate to point out that this image was a later construction heavily influenced by a predominantly Christian culture.

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[81] E.g.: Marco Arnaudo and *The Myth of the Superhero*, trans. Jamie Richards (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 47-51; Anton Kozlovic, "The Holy, non-Christic Biblical Subtexts in *Superman: The Movie* (1978) and *Superman II* (1981)," *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (October 2002), 317-334.
[82] Stephen Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World's Greatest Superhero* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2006), 22.

Those critics of the Christian Superman will often point out the Jewish identity of Superman's creators to underline the essential Jewishness of Superman's origins. For them, Superman is rooted in Siegel and Shuster's experiences as Jewish immigrant-outsiders. In this version, Superman is not sent to earth, but is set adrift in the stars in the hopes that he will survive a race threatened with extinction. He arrives in a new world, a refugee, an immigrant, changing his name from Kal-El (lit. surrounded by God) to Clark Kent, the same ritual of name-changing performed by Siegel's family when they landed at Elis Island. Kal-El is plucked out of a basket, and raised by adoptive parents, looking far more Moses-like than Christ. He moves from Smallville to Metropolis, imitating Jewish migration patterns into cities. And even the use of his Clark Kent persona fits remarkable well with traditional stereotypes of Jewish men, which emphasised a nebbish braininess over brawn. Indeed, Superman was the model of the Jewish golem, raised up in order to protect and defend the community to which it belonged; "The golem was thus animated by truth to serve the cause of justice. These two principles of truth and justice were in fact originally the principles Superman was said to uphold; "the American way" was added by the radio show in the wartime 1940s."[83]

Christopher Knowles and Jeffrey Kripal, on the other hand, construct an account of Superman that is deeply indebted to spiritualism and occultism, seeing Superman as the first superhero to represent a new kind of religious hero. For Knowles, the modern fascination with superheroes has its basis in ancient origins; "when you see fans dressed as their favourite heroes at comic conventions, you are seeing the same type of worship that once played out in the ancient pagan world".[84] In his book, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes*, Knowles tries to make the case that there is a clear connection between 19th century spiritualism and theosophy, and the rise of interest in the occult in the popular literature of the early 20th century. He notes the occult origins of various pulp heroes that were antecedents to early superheroes, especially the connection between Siegel's own pulp creation Doctor Occult and Superman.[85] For Knowles, the origin for the idea of people possessing

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[83] Harry Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?: How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 18. It should be noted that Brod is careful not to claim that Superman *is* Jewish, but rather that certain key elements of Superman's story seem clearly linked to the Jewish identity and *thus* Superman can be spoken of and claimed as Jewish.
[84] Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes*, 16.
[85] Ibid., 115-117.

superhuman abilities was founded on the appeal of occult ideas and theatrical technologies that made the impossible seem possible. This was based, however, on fundamental religious yearnings. Indeed, through superheroes, with Superman leading the charge, the old pagan gods came back to fight the tensions and anxieties of the modern, urban reality; "As America struggled to emerge from the Great Depression , the symbols and stories of the old gods re-entered American culture. In the comic books, these gods and heroes of antiquity truly came alive and helped inspire America to regain its strength."[86] Jeffery Kripal, in *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*, draws out an even more explicit connection between Superman and a theosophical Gnosticism where the alien from Krypton (from the Greek, "kryptos," meaning hidden or occult) was sent to teach us humans a new way of being human.[87]

Ken Schenck argues along a more directly human potential line for Superman's influence; "In one sense Superman is a myth of our human existence. … If reality is measured in part by the effect something had on the world, then Superman is real. He has inspired and impacted countless lives and continues to do so. He calls us to follow his example and fight for truth and justice in the world."[88] Appealing to Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Voltaire, Schenck illuminates the ways in which the human can act or mimic the divine, applying those aspects to the character of Superman who is mortal and human, but appears as so much more.

A more nuanced approach is espoused by Marco Arnaudo in *The Myth of the Superhero*. For Arnaudo, the search for a particular religious archetype – based in either a transcendent or immanent orientation – is bound to fail. As Arnaudo points out in asking the question is Superman Jewish?

> Yes and no, I would say. Superman, just like any successful superhero, exhibits a strong combination of iconicity and flexibility due to two things: (1) strong visual and narrative signs such as masks, symbols, costumes, gadgets, and special abilities—all factors that allows variations while still maintaining a recognizable identity solidly connected to the character's previous incarnations—an (2)

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[86] Ibid., 112.
[87] Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*, 71-75. The difficulty with Kripal's work, though, is that it is not entirely clear how much of it is to be taken seriously as critical interpretation and commentary. The work, by Kripal's own admission, is part of a working out of his own mystical vision of reality.
[88] Ken Schenck, "Superman: A Popular Culture Messiah," in *The Gospel According to Superheroes*, 44.

> seriality, which over the course of months or years allows the gradual but also great variation in the character. Their story is constantly being written and rewritten by many different authors, each of whom might have portrayed the character according to different religious or cultural interpretations.[89]

As a result, "Superman or Wonder Woman lend themselves equally well to various possibilities with equally valid meanings, different aspects of which different authors have chosen to emphasize in their stories … The accelerated folkloric process described by O'Neil has generated different Supermen who can be seen as Jewish and then Christian and then shamanistic."[90] Part of the reason for this polysemic variability in interpretation can be found in the form where the superhero has manifested: what took centuries to develop in former times through oral traditions, has only taken a few generations to develop in the context of mass media.[91]

As noted before, Superman is featured almost invariably from a certain angle that suggests height whereby we who are looking at him are in a physically lower position. We are thus as viewers put in a position of looking up to Superman. Physically, Superman is shown in proportions that generally stretch the mind, shown in a hyper-masculine form. His body, if not necessarily in proportions, stretches the imagination. He is shown repeatedly doing the impossible, what constitutes the impossible itself changing with each new imagining of the character. His strength has reached levels whereby he can move planets if the writers need him to, a feat we cannot even begin to truly imagine in any recognizably human body.[92] Yet through the graphic nature of the medium, Superman's body is also subjected to a violence and torment nearly unimaginable in its postures. Superman as bloody and battered, without a mask to hide his features, is an opportunity for artists to indulge. It is not surprising then, that Superman's

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[89] Marc Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 31.
[90] Ibid., 32.
[91] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Random House, 1965), 328; indeed, according to Jason Dittmer, this polysemic variability is written into the superhero as a function of his very existence in a media-saturated world; "yet the superhero is re-inscribed by different authors in different mediums so that the superhero becomes endlessly multiple with an identity that is quintessentially post-modern." Jason Dittmer, "Retconning America," in *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!: Essays on the Revision of Characters in Comic Books, Film and Television*, 15.
[92] Though, as one might expect, there is a backlash against such representations. Indeed, in the recent direct-to-video animated film, *Justice League: Doom* (2012) Superman suggests this course, for him to move the Earth out of the way of an impending disaster. Batman comments dryly; "If I had a week I couldn't list all the reason why that wouldn't work."

death in Lois's arms bears strikingly resemblance to Michelangelo's *pieta* – both serve to represent, in a way, the point where bodily superhuman endurance fails.[93]

But there is also a danger in pushing the ideal superhuman form too far, as this can lead to a perceived rejection of the ordinary bodily condition of the human by Superman.[94] Just as we cannot lift cars above our heads, we cannot be subjected to the physical punishment that Superman is without ending up a bloody smear on the pavement. Jesus's miracles did not require a superhuman exertion to be accomplished, while Superman's miracles do. This can create a backlash: a modern rejection of Superman precisely as simply beyond the humanly recognizable. As Steven T. Seagle and Teddy Kristiansen articulate in the graphic novel *It's a Bird ...*; "He's not showing us what we can be, because we can't be from another planet, have x-ray vision, flight, or super-strength …"[95] The character in the novel, mirroring Seagle's own life, has the gene for Huntington's Disease: he has a bodily infirmity, a weakness – like many – which would be unimaginable in Superman, especially in his iconic image.

Yet, it is not clear if the same could be said for Clark Kent. While Superman as icon is invested with qualities that take him beyond the human and into transcendence of the human body, the alter-ego Clark Kent is portrayed as very human. In *Man of Steel* (1986) and *Superman: Birthright* (2003), there is considerable attention given to the need for Clark to look different than Superman not just in appearance, but in his very bearing. As the Kents coach him in *Superman: Birthright*, his deep voice must become higher and lighter, with Clark even needing to learn to walk with a perpetual slouch rather than standing up straight and tall.[96] This is taken even further in *All-Star Superman* when Clark interviews Lex while in prison. Wearing bulky clothing, and drawn in such a way to accentuate it, Lex even mentions that while Clark is tall, he needs to "Throw in some weight training and that flabby physique of yours could even

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[93] On this note, Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith point out, not just in regards to Superman; "Rather than disappearing into swirling waters, most superhero bodies are visible in death. In fact, one recurring visual motif associated with superhero deaths is showing the fallen hero in the arms of a comrade in an approximation of Michelangelo's Pieta sculpture of Mary holding the crucified Jesus." *The Power of Comics: History, Form & Culture* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2009), 235.

[94] This ideal representation even extended to his costume for a large period of time in the 1990s, which was presented as not being able to be torn, tarnished, or even dirtied because of an 'invisible aura' that Superman projected around his person (Karl Kessel (w), Tom Grummett (p), "Payback," *Adventures of Superman*, Vol. 1 #506 (November, 1993), DC Comics).

[95] Steven T. Seagle and Teddy H. Kristiansen, *It's a Bird ...* (New York: DC Comics, 2004), 49.

[96] Mark Waid (w), Leinil Francis Yu (p), "A Legacy Reborn," *Superman: Birthright* Vol. 1 #3 (November 2003), DC Comics.

come to rival Superman's."[97] Superman is an ideal image, superhuman, almost by definition challenging what it means to be human by going beyond the limits of what we recognize as human. As Gerald Beritela notes, using the language of Lacan, Superman is the phallus, both ideal and threatening, precisely because it can never to grasped and brought down fully into the human level.[98] For Luthor, this is precisely why Superman is a threat to ordinary human flourishing: he represents an illusionary form unrealizable by any individual human. Clark Kent, however, does not provoke in Luthor a sublime threat. There is an important dichotomy here. While Superman may be sublime, it is questionable if Clark Kent can be the same. Using the language of our study, Clark Kent is a buffered self, and as such one buffered self among others. Superman represents the sublime, outside of the self and pushing against the barriers of the buffered self. As sublime, as pushing against those boundaries, it provides an orientation to the self while also threatening to expose cracks in our boundaries.

In terms of icon, Superman can be used as a way to access the sublime and break us out of our complacency. He becomes a model to follow, a standard to judge the self against. At the same time, especially within the context of the Superman narrative, he also represents something else: the alien other, the monstrous that appears human but is not, challenging and subverting the values of ordinary human flourishing. As Luthor intones in *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel*: "… all men are created equal. All men are created equal. All men. You are not a man."[99] As the alien other, as the phallus that offers ultimate power, but a power that is illusory because unattainable, Superman represents an end of human development: "Those red eyes, I'm sure they look right through me, like I am nothing more than a nuisance. But when I see you? I see something that no man can ever be. I see the end. The end of our potential. The end of our achievement. The end of our dreams. You are my nightmare."[100] This is the view of Lex Luthor, Superman's great arch-nemesis, articulated in the context of a post-9/11 world. Pre-9/11 Luthor rarely, if ever, frames his opposition to Superman along the lines of alien outsider. Instead, Luthor's animosity most often is directed to Superman's usurpation of Luthor's rightful place of hero in the eyes of

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[97] Grant Morrison (w), Frank Quitely (p), "The Gospel According to Lex Luthor," *All-Star Superman* Vol. 1 #5 (September 2006), DC Comics.
[98] Gerald Beritela, "Super-Girls and Mild Mannered Men: Gender Trouble in Metropolis," in *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!*, 55.
[99] Brian Azzarello, Lee Bermejo, et al, *Luthor* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 20.
[100] Ibid., 23.

Metropolis and the world.[101] After 9/11, a new element is added. For Luthor, Superman is the archetypal alien among us: looking like us, he is not us - Superman is not just Luthor's Other, but humanity's Other.

Luthor's suspicion focuses not only on the idea of the alien posing as the human, but that Superman presents an alien and impossible ideal; "We all fall short of that sickening, inhuman perfection. That impossible ideal … It's easy to be strong when you just happen to have come from the planet Krypton!"[102] As alien other, Superman makes ordinary human life appear small and weak. He threatens to violently disturb humanity's sense of place in the universe by exposing humanity's frailty in the face of evil. Superman calls us out of complacency due to the vast, infinite height from which he speaks when compared with an ordinary human. This vastness evokes fear and awe; it evokes the sublime, or at least is capable of evoking it. However, insofar as it ruptures the perception of the innate worthiness of humanity, that image can also become monstrous.

Probably the most potent image of Superman-as-monstrous is the portrayal of Superman as symbol of apocalyptic, wrathful destruction. This can be seen particularly well in the *Kingdom Come* graphic novel by Mark Waid and Alex Ross. This award winning work is set in the future.[103] Superman has retreated from the world. He has conceded that the world has rejected his model of the heroic super-human, rejected his model of human potential preferring instead the violence of the more human-like anti-hero. He is notably older in this graphic novel, the hair at his temples greying, his muscular form no longer drawn to accentuate his taunt masculine brawn. He lives in self-imposed exile at his Fortress of Solitude, spending most of his time working on basic farm tasks while on a holographic projection of his Smallville farm, destroyed along with Kansas in a super-powered nuclear explosion. When Wonder Woman visits him in the hopes of convincing him to return, Superman alludes to the spectre of his

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[101] See, for example, Kurt Busiek, Geoff Johns, et al. *Superman: Up, Up, and Away!* (New York: DC Comics, 2006).

[102] Grant Morrison (w), Frank Quitely (p), "The Gospel According to Lex Luthor," *All-Star Superman* Vol. 1 #5 (September 2006), DC Comics.

[103] It received Eisner awards for Best Interior Art (Alex Ross), Best Cover Art (Alex Ross), Best Limited Series, and Best Publication Design, among others in 1997, as well as Harvey Awards for Best Penciller (Alex Ross), and Best Cover Artists (Alex Ross). The Eisner and Harvey Awards are named after Will Eisner and Harvey Kurtzman, both very influential in the history of comic books, and celebrate achievement in the medium.

Superman-as-alien self and even refers to his dead parents and wife as "earthlings," underscoring his own sense of disconnection from the human.

Superman does eventually return to active service, but *as outsider*, as the pre-eminent superhero he has other superheroes join him in order to preserve peace. But it is a peace that is imposed (literally) from above, in the form of the Justice League's orbiting space station. Superman and his allies go about constructing a superhuman prison, banishing any superhuman unwilling to accept their strict moral vision. But, as David Hatfield points out, the real problem is that "the difference between the violence that leads to falling apart and the violence that revives" is not so clear-cut.[104] Superman receives a glimmer of his own burgeoning monstrosity when he realizes he "shouldn't have to fight this hard." He, in his very mythology, is wrapped up in a Girardian 'relentless chronicle of violence,' trying to find a way out.[105]

Batman, a human, is the only one to comment on the black background for the 'S' on Superman's chest – a background that once was a sunlit yellow. The implications for humanity are clear. So long as Superman and his allies enforce their peace from above, humans are controlled by forces beyond them: "Long have these mortals suspected that they are no longer captains of humanity's destiny. Their suspicions have just been confirmed."[106] During the fateful battle between the superheroes, humans attempt to detonate a nuclear bomb to destroy all the combatants. Captain Marvel, part mortal, part superhero, sacrifices himself to limit the damage of the bomb, but most superheroic beings are killed. Anguished and alone in a field of grey corpses, Superman's eyes turn red with fury and he becomes the harbinger of the angel of vengeance, ready to be unleashed upon humanity. His inner potential for pure monstrosity is writ large.

The graphic effect, drawn in the photo-realistic style of Alex Ross, is dramatic. Alone on the splash page, small against the skeletal grey corpses is Superman's blue, red, and black costumed, anguished form looking up to the sky. On the next page, as Superman staggers to his feet, a smoke-enshrouded figure of blacks and greys, he looks up. The attention is focused on Superman's eyes, the most vibrant splash of colour across the two pages. His eyes are inferno

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[104] David Hatfield, "Superman's Revelation: The Problem of Violence in *Kingdom Come*," in *Superman and Philosophy: What Would the Man of Steel Do?*, 140.
[105] Ibid., 142.
[106] Kurt Busiek, et al, *Kingdom Come*, 70.

red, symbolizing pure anger and fury. Superman then flies away fully intent on wrecking wrathful judgement upon humanity.[107]

Such apocalyptic images run throughout the four volumes that comprise *Kingdom Come*.[108] One of the recurring elements is a quote from the Biblical book of Revelations at the start of each issue, which matches surprisingly well with the superhero genre. The first image, a foreshadowing of the conflict to come, is a splash page done in hues of inferno red and black, with a bat and a bald eagle, a stylized American flag flowing about the eagle's neck, about to clash. The narration reads; "There were voices … and thunder and lightning … and an earthquake".[109] This immediately brings to mind the apocalyptic conflict, lighting and earth-moving imagery of super-powered beings clashing with one another. The next page is a double-splash page that continues the quote from Revelations, as well as showing a shadowy conflict of biblical proportions, observed through a red haze. The combatants themselves, indistinct silhouettes, could easily be mistaken for superheroes, and the scene is connected visually, stylistically, and through colour palette to the super-powered conflict of chapter 4. Throughout all the chapters of *Kingdom Come* the haze of inferno red marks moments of wrath and primordial violence. Thus when that red is shown again in Superman's eyes after the detonation, the reader understands the meaning of the image: Superman himself unleashed as wrath and primordial violence and vengeful judgement upon humanity.

That wrath, aimed at humanity, but ultimately aimed at his own failings, is finally calmed and assuaged precisely by an appeal to Superman's forgotten humanity. It is the human Norman McCay, the minister responsible for passing judgement on either the superhero or human community as an agent of God's own judgement on both human and superhuman alike,[110] that stops Superman's rampage, reminding him that; "Of all the things you can do … all your powers

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[107] Within the comic itself, the reader is immediately drawn to the irony of the situation of Superman racing off to wreck vengeance, as the main point of view character throughout the graphic novel, Norman McCay, is himself the human anchor for the entity known as the Spectre – "the wandering spirit of God's vengeance." It is McCay, not Superman, who will ultimately be the judge as to who is guilty – superhumans or humans – and who should have vengeance struck upon them.

[108] *Kingdom Come* was originally published as a limited, 4-issue series, which meant a cover page for each of the issues.

[109] From Revelations 16: 18.

[110] The Spectre – "the wandering spirit of God's own vengeance" – chose Norman McCay back in the first issue to act as his human anchor to the mortal world. We see the action unfold throughout the graphic novel as the Spectre takes him to witness all the important moments of the drama precisely so that McCay can act as judge as to who is in the right between humans and superhumans.

… the greatest has always been your instinctive knowledge … of right … and wrong. It was a gift of your own humanity … But the minute you made the super more important than the man … the day you decided to turn your back on mankind … that completely cost you that instinct." In the end balance is restored. Clark, after being stirred from his self-imposed exile, is jolted out of his complacency by the threat of his very own power, and oriented towards a new understanding of his place in the universe.[111]

This image takes a different turn, however, in the context of post 9/11 America where the fear of the 'alien' turns inward rather than outward. But in turning inwards, in seeking to insulate oneself from the outside, the sublime's ability to orient the self in *relation* to the outside, becomes damaged. In turning inwards, there is an attempt to shore up the boundaries of the buffered self by transforming the alien other into another self, implicated in strategies and politics that are human, understandable, and in that way non-threatening. Within the "New Krypton" story arc, 100,000 Kryptonians arrive on Earth when the bottled city of Kandor is rescued and brought back to full size. Suddenly, overnight, the populace of earth have potentially 100,000 supermen to help defend and protect them. However, these hopes are dashed. When someone needs rescuing – trapped in a car for instance and needing medical attention – Kryptonian observers fly away without bothering to trouble themselves.[112] For the Kryptonians, humans are little above animals, and they struggle to understand what possible reason Superman might have to associate with them; "From what I can see, humans are a poorer, lesser version of us. Pathetic and inferior yet mired in hubris. Let them all die. I don't care."[113] The sublime alien other is no longer saviour or protector, but in their refusal to integrate and aid society they become unwelcome immigrants. As the story reaches its conclusion, Superman must choose between his fellow Kryptonians or humans. In embracing humanity, the very power of the sublime to orient oneself to a greater power is directly challenged. Instead, what seems to be suggested is a reversal of the original impetus of the sublime, namely an orientation *towards* the human, rather than to something external to humanity.

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[111] Busiek, et al, *Kingdom Come*, 195, 211 respectively.
[112] Geoff Johns (w), Pete Woods (p), "Beyond Doomsday," *Action Comics* Vol. 1 #871 (January 2009), Part 4 [of 10], DC Comics.
[113] James Robinson (w), Renato Guedes (p), Jorge Correa, Jr. (p), "New Krypton (Part IX of X) – Hard Times!" *Superman* Vol. 1 #683. "New Krypton" Part IX [of X] (February 2009), DC Comics.

It is interesting to note, that while the supermen of Krypton are a focus of the sublime for humans, the same is not so for Superman. A Kryptonian is not a source of the sublime for another Kryptonian, as they are not essentially alien to each other. Reminiscent of Kant's mathematical sublime, for Superman, a Kryptonian himself, other Kryptonians are understandable and quantifiable in terms of Superman's own abilities. The case of General Zod is an example. In the same storyline General Zod, a long-time foe of Superman, plans the genocide of all of humanity. This act would represent an evil beyond all imagining. However, as a Kryptonian, Superman does not react to General Zod in a way that would suggest recognition of an absolute evil. Rather, Zod's plans are couched in understandable terms, and thus diminished. Given a veneer of understandability, they are subscribed within the realm of the measureable and manageable: remembering Kant, the measurable cannot be sublime, so General Zod no longer threatens with a monstrous sublimity. This measurability and manageability can be seen in the artistic side too, in the visual portrayal of General Zod. Despite being a superhuman general planning on destroying the human race, he rarely dominates a page within the story arc. This is contrasted with Superman where such dominant visual representation is standard. General Zod is powerful, but he can be combated through normal means. Zod is an alien and a supervillain, but he does not represent the monstrous sublime. Something more seems to be required.

The distinction between Lex Luthor and Doomsday better serves to illustrate this point. While Lex Luthor stands as a constant foil for Superman, acting most consistently as Superman's arch-nemesis, there is little doubt that he does not represent a form of the sublime, even a monstrous one. Luthor, as a human, might represent everything Superman sees as evil in humanity, but Luthor is still circumscribed by his humanity, and as human he has limits. Unless Luthor can access or represent some limitless value or ideal, he remains solidly human. This is made explicit in Action Comics #899 and #900, where Luthor encounters a near-limitless being, before forcing the conflict into the realm of the mind where he contains the being within his buffered self. Luthor's buffered self is in control within the realm of the mind, "… an environment I understand and can control. While I … I … I am that I am."[114] Through the force of his will he forces a being with the power to destroy the universe into the confines of his mind:

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[114] Paul Cornell (w), Jesús Merino (p), "The Black Ring, Part Ten," *Action Comics*, Vol. 1 #899 (May 2011) DC Comics.

the buffered self is shown to be greater than a god. Yet, when offered the possibility to be greater than Superman by bringing universal happiness to all, Luthor refuses, since it would mean also bringing happiness to his arch-enemy Superman.[115] By being defined by Superman and his own nature,[116] Luthor is limited despite his immense human power. He is not able to access the vast 'Excess' that Taylor characterizes as a key dimension of the sublime.

The character of Doomsday, on the other hand, at least in his initial appearance, seems to capture the essence of the monstrous in its most primal and violent form. In his initial series of appearances in the "Death of Superman" story arc there is no attempt to give a rational explanation for the acts of this Doomsday creature. The name itself was given to him by one of the heroes of the Justice League, who after being launched into the stratosphere by the creature said, "It's like Doomsday is here."[117] Indeed, to try and provide an explanation and name a phenomenon is precisely to limit the impact of the sublime by trying to fit it into understandable categories. Such a purpose is a strategy for preserving the self against the violence in the 'Excess' of the monstrousness of the sublime. In Action Comics #684, Doomsday is portrayed as being outside of the normal order of things by Superman himself; "I've never seen anything -- on earth or off it -- to equal him for sheer brute strength." This power evades any attempt at rational explanation, and seems to epitomize primal, infinite, destructiveness; "There's no discernable pattern to his movements -- he just seems to wander from place to place attacking whatever catches his eye."[118]

It might be useful here to try and draw out more the distinction between 'monster' and the idea of the 'monstrous'. We use the word 'monster' in common parlance to describe a variety of different beings or situations that can serve to demarcate a specific discrete entity, but also an act by a particular subject. Doomsday is a monster in similar ways as a dragon or golem might be: it is a discrete entity, representing something beyond the norm. We can also call Lex Luthor a 'monster' when he callously throws someone away after using them to further his aims. The nature of the monstrous, however, is different. While linked to the monster, with the

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[115] Paul Cornell (w), Pete Wood (p), Gary Frank (p), et al, "The Black Ring, Finale – The Reign of Doomsday," *Action Comics* Vol. 1#900 (June 2011), DC Comics.
[116] Paul Cornell (w), Jesús Merino (p), "The Black Ring, Part Ten"
[117] Dan Jurgens (w, p), "Down for the Count," *Justice League America* Vol. 1 #69 (December 1992), Part 2 [of 7], "Doomsday," DC Comics.
[118] Roger Stern (w), Jackson Guice (p), "… Doomsday is Near!" *Action Comics* Vol. 1 #684 (December 1992), Part 5 [of 7], "Doomsday," DC Comics.

monster (entity or act) usually connected to the monstrous, the monstrous itself is often linked up with the sublime, but in a way that emphasizes liminality and otherness: "The language of the monstrous is parasitic, depending on the existence of conventional languages; it feeds, so to speak, at their margins, upon their limits, so as to gain the power to transcend these analytic discourses and, true to its etymology (monstrare: to show), it points to utterances that lie beyond logic."[119] Along those same lines Judith Halberstam writes, "the monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities".[120] But they are also closely related to the sublime as their monstrous otherness provides an orientation for the self, providing meaning; "By locating monsters off the social map, we locate ourselves on it."[121]

All of this is premised upon, in Taylor's understanding, the rise of the notion of the buffered self. The monstrous other can live and lurk at the edges of thought, precisely because the self has created a barrier that separates it from others. Beyond this barrier exists other buffered selves which we posit and engage: the buffered self wants to create more buffered selves, as boundaries are then intensified and ensured. But in the spaces between, monsters lurk, eating, breaking, and disrupting those boundaries as they resist being bound. As Pat Gill notes, the notion of the buffered self, buttressed by significant strands of Enlightenment thought, serves as the basis of the notion of the self for most film, television, and, we can add, comic books.[122] However, the monstrous, in exposing the subjectivity of our thoughts and assumptions, directly challenges the notion of the buffered self in its de facto status for human experience. The fear of man-as-machine, the factory line zombie, or the fear of being a victim to vampiric capitalism, is a fear that our notions of the self do not reflect reality at all, but that the impervious buffered self is really only an illusion.[123] As E. Michael Jones argues, this fear is real, not a liberating, pleasure inducing frisson, as Taylor would seem to suggest. If it was liberating, we could

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[119] David Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, 25.
[120] Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 27.
[121] Edward J. Ingebretsen, *At Stake: Monsters and the Rhetoric of Fear in Public Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 5. This imagery of the monstrous as helping to locate us can also be found in Ingebretsen's earlier work, *Maps of Heaven, Maps of Hell: Religious Terror as Memory from the Puritans to Stephen King* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996).
[122] Pat Gill, "Making a Killing in the Marketplace: Incorporation as a Monstrous Process," in *Monsters in and among Us: Toward a Gothic Criminology*, 147.
[123] Ibid., 146.

imagine letting these monsters into our homes, instead of being willing to fight them to the death.[124]

Part of the appeal, then, of the superhero comic, action movie and the like, is that in the response to the fear, terror and feeling of powerlessness induced by the monstrous monster, it also creates an orientation and access to even greater feelings of power in order to resist the evil. As Kearney notes, "Evil is not just something we struggle against, it is also something we undergo. To ignore this passivity of evil suffered is to ignore the extent to which evil strikes us as shockingly strange and disempowering."[125] Such an admission, though, leaves the buffered self vulnerable, for it is forced to acknowledge its own porousness: there is no 'resonance' with evil, but it is strange, other, and disempowering. We become painfully aware that the first boundary of the buffered self, our skin, is vulnerable to the outside world. "Practical understanding" Kearney states, "can only redirect us toward action if it has already recognized that an element of alterity almost always attaches to evil, especially when it concerns illness, horror, catastrophe or death. No matter how prepared we are to make sense of evil we are never prepared enough."[126] This, then, poses a significant problem for the superhero understood as a buffered self. If there is a radical alterity attached to evil, then the self is always vulnerable, with the buffered self threatened with exposure. If, however, evil is contextualized in the villains one faces, understood, and brought into manageable dimensions – if however strange, they can be understood in human terms – then evil loses its alterity, and the buffered self is safe.

Doomsday, in his initial appearance in the Superman comics, is a monster but also monstrous. His sheer destructive capability spills out beyond established societal norms, threatening the buffered self and forcing it to recognize the inherent irrational violence within existence. Doomsday's primal violence pushes up against the buffered self, threatening to break in, while also providing Superman with the realization of even greater resources within the self to confront this threat. Lex Luthor, on the other hand, might be a monster, might represent greed and ambition run amuck, but insofar as he is defined, contained, and explainable within the human context, he becomes a buffered self and does not break out into the monstrous. The clash

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[124] E. Michael Jones, *Monsters from the Id: The Rise of Horror in Fiction and Film* (Dallas: Spence Pub. Co., 2000), 262.
[125] Richard Kearney, "Evil, Monstrosity and the Sublime," 501.
[126] Ibid.

between Lex Luthor and Superman is over ideologies, over competing conceptions of the good and what constitutes human fullness. The clash between Doomsday and Superman is not over ideology, but the danger Doomsday represents to the foundation of the self.

This dichotomy can be fruitfully brought out by turning to the X-men series of comics. When looking at the X-men, especially in their rogue's gallery of villains, it is interesting to note the absence of the monstrous among them. There are plenty of monsters that have done horrible things, but there seems to be a strategy – unconscious or not – that limits and humanizes these beings, robbing them of their monstrous and sublime potential. Part of the reason for this seems to be connected to the larger shift to the political in the X-men through its focus on minority and identity issues. The threats in such a situation come less from 'Excess', and more from the question of what it means to be human.[127] Magneto wields immense powers and is capable of horrendous action for the sake of the mutant race, yet he is contained precisely within that agenda. He might do evil things, but he can be reasoned with if one knows the ideological arguments to use. It is hard to imagine Doomsday or Dracula succumbing to superior argumentation. The conflict with Magneto is articulated in such a way that it is perceived as a conflict between values, a choice of options – of who and what we are – and not something that spills out, threatening the critical core of our buffered selves.

The point of view throughout the X-men series of comics is that of a mutant, a person gifted with strange powers that make them outsiders. As outsiders, they are called upon to watch over and protect humans and mutants.[128] They occupy, in many ways, the role of the alien other, but when presented as the point of view of engagement of the reader, we become the alien, read the situation as a mutant ourselves. In this context Magneto, a mutant, might destroy half of New York, but he is not truly monstrous as we can understand and measure his motivations. As

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[127] See, for example, Neil Shyminsky, "Mutant Readers, Reading Mutants: Appropriation, Assimilation, and the X-Men," 387-405; Matthew Diebler, '"I'm Not One of *Them* Anymore": Marvel's X-men and the Loss of Minority (Racial) Identity,' *International Journal of Comic Art*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2006), 406-413; Jeremy Pierce, "Mutants and the Metaphysics of Race," in *X-Men and Philosophy: Astonishing Insight and Uncanny Argument in the Mutant X-Verse*, eds. Rebecca Housel and Jeremy Wisnewski (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009), 183-193.

[128] Throughout the 2000s this assumption is continually questioned and is not taken as a given, with the needs of the (minority) community challenging the need for integration.

a mutant, one can reason with him. As the X-men's main foe for most of their existence,[129] it is significant that the conflict is articulated along political and ideological grounds.

An element of strategic alliances and shared ideologies can be found throughout the X-men line. If the villains of the X-men universe repeatedly strategically align themselves with the X-men and others to attain measurable goals, then those goals are conceivable and understandable rather than representing the 'inconceivably *Other*'.[130] Yet the X-men's most tractable foes do exactly that, strategically align themselves with the X-men when their goals mutually intersect. The figure of Apocalypse is ideologically committed to the idea of survival of the fittest, and can align himself with the X-men when mutants – specimens of the fittest – are threatened with extinction.[131] A computer program that gains sentience has the potential for a very different consciousness than humans and therefore has the potential to stand-in for the monstrous 'Other' challenging the buffered self. However, this entity is removed from the radically monstrous through its use of various understandable strategies to achieve its goals.[132] Its monstrous liminality is dissolved by the strategic calculations that make it look very human. The list goes on and on. Even a bacterial lifeform, interestingly named 'Sublime,' is described in human terms and in terms of recognizably human ideology. While the figure of Sublime could easily have been treated as a form of the monstrous due to the human fear of disease, bacteria and genetic manipulation, Sublime instead is integrated into strategies and counter-strategies that serve to limit the perception of monstrous 'Excess'. It is portrayed more as a buffered bacterial self, than as a monstrous entity threatening to break in upon the buffered self.

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[129] As with most characters in the X-men, there are any number of caveats to that statement. While their main foe, he has also served as their teacher and ally for significant stretches of time when the writers wanted to focus on a threat that would unite the mutant race against an outsider, or even when looking at an exploration of redemption.
[130] Clare Pitkethly, "The Pursuit of Identity in the Face of Paradox: Indeterminacy, Structure and Repetition in Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman," 218.
[131] E.g.: Louise Simonson (w), Terry Shoemaker (p), "Unnatural Selection," *X-Factor Annual*, Vol. 1 #3 (August 1988). Part 1 [of 11] "Evolutionary War" (August-November 1988), Marvel Comics; Scott Lobdell (w), Joe Madureira (p), "A Voice as Deep as Thunder," *Uncanny X-men*, Vol. 1 #336 (September 1996), Marvel Comics; Peter Milligan (w), Roger Cruz (p), "The Leper Queen," *X-men*, Vol. 2 #181 (March 2006). Part 2 [of 2] "What Lorna Saw" (February-March 2006), Marvel Comics.
[132] As it was first conceived, Danger – as the machine is called – understands itself as "I am not you – I am designed to be 'not you'." (Josh Whedon (w), John Cassady (p), "Dangerous," *Astonishing X-men*, Vol. 3 #10 (May 2005). Part 4 [of 6] "Dangerous" (January-August 2005), Marvel Comics). It is pure becoming, machinery in constant changing configuration, without being. However, it becomes obsessed with killing its 'father', Professor Xavier, and allies with others against the X-men, while programmed to be incapable of killing them. What could have been a true example of monstrous otherness quickly becomes just one more villain.

This was not always the case, or at least there was greater variations in earlier storylines. In the story arcs during the period of the 2000s, there appears to be an intensification of efforts to buffer anomalous or mutant expressions of the self against the threats that the sublime or monstrous present. An interesting example here is that of the Phoenix, a character that has slowly morphed over time from a vast entity in its own right, into a 'force' that is controllable and useable by persons in pursuit of their particular aims and agendas.

The Phoenix made its first significant appearance in *Uncanny X-men* #101 (1976) having bonded with the telekinetic Jean Grey in order to save her life and the life of the X-men as they plummet to earth from space. We are introduced to the Phoenix when Jean Grey spontaneously transforms into a different costume, flies into the air and announces; "Hear me X-men! No longer am I the woman you knew! I am fire! And life incarnate! Now and forever -- I am Phoenix."[133] After this brief episode, Jean Grey reverts back to her normal self, but unable to contain the vast power within her, falls into a coma. She eventually revives, but the entity within constantly threatens to overpower her; "My power -- it's hitting me like a drug. I've never felt such … ecstasy. God in heaven, what have I become?"[134] In the course of saving the galaxy, she merges with the Phoenix, experiencing a sublime, mystical encounter; "I'm … beautiful. I'm Jean -- yet I'm Phoenix. And I feel … as if, for the first time in my life, I'm … truly alive!"[135] Jean's buffered self, her very identity, is pressed in upon from outside by a force that threatens the self with a recognition of the self's ultimate porousness. With the help of her friends joining her as one, she heals the universe by transforming their energy into the tree of life, mending the cracks in creation that had endangered the universe. Despite its melodramatic moments, the story that is narrated and illustrated is an attempt to grasp a sublime, new reality of a unity with creation that goes well beyond the boundaries of the buffered self.

The Phoenix returns a few years later in the series as the Dark Phoenix, the monstrous side of the sublime from the previous incarnation. The Dark Phoenix is concerned only with its own desires, unable to comprehend the needs of lesser creatures. She is a figure of the monstrous sublime, threatening everything, even existence. As if to underscore this point, on the

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[133] Chris Claremont (w), Dave Cockrum (p), "Like a Phoenix, from the Ashes," *X-men* Vol. 1 #101 (October 1976), Marvel Comics.
[134] Chris Claremont (w), Dave Cockrum (p), "Phoenix Unleashed," *X-Men* Vol. 1 #105 (June 1977), Marvel Comics.
[135] Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (p), "Armageddon Now," *X-men* Vol. 1 #108 (December 1977), Marvel Comics.

first page of *Uncanny X-men* #135 the Dark Phoenix announces dramatically; "Witness the birth of a god."[136] "She strikes like the angel of death -- terrible in her inhuman beauty … as elemental, as majestic, as the stars in the heavens … and as irresistible."[137] Even her visage changes, her face constantly caught in shadows, drawn not as greys, but as black streaks completely preventing us from seeing any detail within. Before Jean had been *tiphereth*, the force at the centre of the tree of life, connecting all paths into itself in the reckoning of popular kabbalah. Now, as Dark Phoenix, she is pure destruction: she feeds on a star causing it to go supernova, ending 5 billion lives on a nearby planet without a thought or consideration.[138]

All of this is carefully crafted to heighten the emotional intensity of the story, but the Dark Phoenix is also clearly a force that escapes the bounds of the buffered self, threatening with exposure the thinness of the boundaries by which the self is contained. Yet, Jean does contain it by orienting herself back to her connection with her teammates, and the love she has for them.[139] In the end, that control is only temporary, as she realizes the greatest fear of the buffered self: that there is something greater that even it cannot contain – "The phoenix is a cosmic power. It can neither be contained nor controlled -- especially by a human vessel. Return it to the cosmos which is its home."[140] Yet, despite the significance of this dark idea in anchoring arguably the best known X-men story, this idea of Phoenix as sublime and outside human capacity is slowly eroded with time. As the X-men become more ideologically focused on identity politics the buffered self, as key to self-identity, increases in importance and power at the expense of the sublime

The Phoenix re-appears five years later in 1985 for two brief pages, when Rachel Summers calls upon and claims the power of Phoenix as her own.[141] Rachel is the future child of Scott Summers and Jean Grey, sent back into the past and then trapped there before her birth. The Phoenix dissipates quickly, and Rachel is deeply concerned that no one can contain the Phoenix's powers. Yet, in an important move, the power is contained and connected to a

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[136] Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (w, p), "Dark Phoenix," *X-men* Vol. 1 #135 (July 1980), Marvel Comics.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Chris Claremont (w), John Byrne (w, p), "The Fate of the Phoenix," *X-men* Vol. 1 #137 (September 1980), Marvel Comics.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Chris Claremont (w), John Romita, Jr. (p), "The Spiral Path," *Uncanny X-men* Vol. 1 #199 (November 1985), Marvel Comics.

particular human bloodline. It is becoming humanized. In the early 1990s Jean Grey again begins to manifest aspects of the Phoenix's powers, but she is still terrified by its destructive potential. Crucially, the sublime force of Phoenix is slowly becoming classified, managed and defined within the contours of the human person who wields it.

This trend continues throughout the 2000s. The symbol of sublime power, the Phoenix *Force*, is repeatedly displayed as fractured, controlled and contained within a variety of individuals who thus are able to wield its power, yet not feel the threat of the sublime overwhelming the buffered self. Indeed, some are even able to reject its influence entirely. In the series that marks the end of this study, "Avengers vs. X-men," the Phoenix Force itself is used and treated much less like an entity, but as a force in order to re-start the mutant gene that was stopped at the Decimation story arc.[142] Even the treatment of Cyclops, who wields the power of the Dark Phoenix in this story arc, is in marked contrast to the original wielder of the Dark Phoenix, Jean Grey. It is Cyclops whom the heroes interact with and try and stop; it is Cyclops who is opposed, not the Dark Phoenix as in the original Dark Phoenix story arc. The Phoenix Force no longer spills out and threatens the buffered self, even as Dark Phoenix, but is contained within it, no longer posing the threat implied in the unrestricted force of the sublime.

A more robust discourse on the power of the sublime is evident in the *Astro City* series, a series which seems to deliberately explore issues of re-enchantment. There are two main sites where this is visible. The first, developing a theme found in trajectories of the Superman series, is the superhero as pure archetype, divorced from any restrictive human alter ego. As archetype, the superhero is representative of an idea that stretches beyond the confines of the self, creating an 'Excess' of meaning that can then be encountered and used in orienting the self. This can be seen especially in the consciously archetypal characters of the Samaritan, Winged Victory, the Hanged Man, and the Confessor. The second place where we encounter the sublime is in a return to physical place as sublime. Here, as the title of the series might suggest, there is a way in which the infinite possibilities and grandeur of the modern urban city, with its skyscrapers

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[142] The whole Avengers vs. X-men crossover event took place in 2012 and ran through almost all of the Marvel Universe line of comics. The premise was that the Phoenix Force was coming back to earth but was splintered in 5 segments when Ironman shot a beam at it. Already this is not the same Phoenix as in the original. Slowly, as the series unfolds, Cyclops disables the other 4 Phoenix hosts in order to possess all the power of the Phoenix, but then is defeated by Hope Summers. In the process the mutant gene is re-awakened, causing mutants to appear again.

soaring ever skyward, replaces the pristine 'Excess' of Taylor's wilderness for the modern self. Through *Astro City* we are reminded of the power of cities to capture the imagination.

One of Busiek's primarily purposes in writing Astro City was as an attempt to reconstruct the genre of the superhero in the face of the changing cultural context of 1990s. This period witnessed the deconstruction of the superhero genre and disenchantment with the heroic. Busiek's reconstruction relies upon the archetypes already established not only within the contemporary genre, but within the history of literature and myth as well. In Busiek's understanding, Superman is not the archetype for a particular contemporary form of the heroic, but rather draws upon more ancient archetypes. Winged Victory and the Confessor each draw upon the same classical archetypes as Wonder Woman and Batman, namely the Amazon and Odysseus.[143] The Confessor/Batman connection is a prime case in point. Both of them share similar traits as shadowy vigilantes, an archetype that certainly stretches back before the comic era to figures such as The Phantom, the Scarlet Pimpernel, and even Robin Hood. They are all willing to utilize the dark to their best effect. These vigilantes strike from the shadows, using the powers of night against criminals. This constructive use of the forces of darkness exploits the ambiguities of the urban setting, the sense of evil and danger lurking within the shadows. The more mysterious they are, the larger-than-life they appear. Batman and the Confessor both share certain archetypal similarities, which bring them to the border of monster and terror.

*Astro City* Vol. 2, issue #4, entitled "New Kid in Town," starts with a young man, Kinney, the main 'point of view' character throughout the arc, migrating to the city. As he enters the city, he is struck with awe at the possibilities for a new life there, and the superheroes that live within. Kinney, in the course of working a catering job, is held up by a minor villain. In a dark alley afterwards, he encounters several thugs and prepares to defend himself the best he can. The Confessor suddenly appears, sitting on a ledge of a building behind Kinney, a building cracked and showing signs of urban decay. A cross is emblazoned and glowing on his chest, the black robes billowing around him, his eyes glowing with an unearthly light. Even his words are written and inked in a tone conveying night, menace and depth. He informs the thugs that he wants to talk to the young man privately. Kinney is soon accepted as the Confessor's sidekick, named Altar Boy, and begins to be mentored in the way of the superhero.

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[143] Kurt Busiek, Interview with Alex Ness, "Busiek Enters the Land of Frost: the Kurt Busiek Interview," Stlcomics, Accessed May 15, 2014, http://stlcomics.com/columns/tftlof/IV/.

The story arc lasts for six issues. The mood and dangerous power of the Confessor is established through several narrative devices. He is drawn frequently with his face dominating the panel, the frame unable to capture his full visage. One glowing, menacing eye against a backdrop of black is enough to suggest his threatening power, particularly the threat he possess to more mundane conceptions of the outlaw self. Against criminals, he holds almost a magic aura: there is fear in their eyes when he appears. His gaze breaks the spirit of the strong. He rarely speaks, and reveals next to nothing about himself. When his sidekick asks him about himself, the Confessor turns the table; "You want to know my secrets? Where I go? Where I came from? Earn your answers boy, find out for yourself. Then we'll talk."[144] The Confessor serves as a mysterious inspiration, able to do things Kinney can only marvel. He takes Kinney out of his small world, and orients him towards a much bigger one.

The Confessor's comment about his identity pushes Kinney to seek the bigger picture, to try and uncover the patterns and unravel the sublime mystery behind the Confessor. This rises to a crescendo until Kinney learns the truth about the Confessor: he is a former priest, who through a weakness of flesh, became a vampire when Astro City was still young. His nightly vigil against crime, and wearing a cross that harms him, is part of a self-inflicted penance. With this knowledge, the Confessor no longer represents the night and the terrors that lurk there, but the human depth of repentance and redemption. Yet, something else happens here too: the Confessor becomes diminished, no longer dominating panels. Once his secret has been revealed, he becomes less threatening, more human. Instead of dominating panels, he now just as often shares them proportionately with Kinney and others. Within the panels, he becomes physically smaller. Now that the mystery of who he is solved, he no longer holds the same aura of the sublime as he did before. The question he poses is now firmly within the register of the human. Intriguingly, while in all the previous encounters with thugs the criminals were portrayed as fearing the Confessor, in issue #8, with Kinney knowing his secret, a group of nameless thugs actively charge and fight back against the Confessor. Seen through the eyes of Kinney, the Confessor's aura is broken. Eventually, the Confessor is killed while saving the city and planet from invasion, revealing himself to be a vampire in the process. After four years, Kinney takes up the mantle of the Confessor in turn, causing criminals and other undesirables to fear the night

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[144] Kurt Busiek (w), Brent Anderson (p), "Learning the Game," *Astro City* Vol. 2 #5 (January 1997), Image Comics.

once again; "They were nervous. They'd heard stories, rumours. Whispers of something that couldn't be true."[145] The new Confessor, dominating the final panel of issue #9, is once again causing criminals to fall into fits of terror. The original archetype that the Confessor represented has returned, and with it the presence of monstrous sublime terror.

Just as dominant an archetype as the superhero, if not more so, is the representation of the sublime found in the grandeur and promise of Astro City itself. This corresponds to an element explored earlier in the chapter, namely, urbanization in the American context seen as a source of the sublime. Examples of this exist all over the American landscape, especially marked by their appeal as tourist destinations. The Empire State Building, Times Square, Statue of Liberty, Golden Gate Bridge, Hoover Dam, and Las Vegas Strip all frequently elicit characteristics easily identifiable with that of the 18th century conceptions of the wilderness as vast, powerful and untamed. Even by the second half of the 19th century, Americans were merging the natural sublime with the man-made, combining natural, technological, classical and religious elements into one aesthetic sublime.[146] The height, size, and other factors of the man-made marvels fill the cityscape and seem to dwarf the human, threatening to overwhelm the senses. Yet, at the same time, and in a special way especially for the modern self, they also confirm the self, in the technological and engineering awe that humans like themselves created such marvels. It pushes the boundaries as to what is possible. In the cityscape, under American auspices, "The sublime was inseparable from a peculiar double action of the imagination by which the land was appropriated as a natural symbol of the nation while at the same time, it was being transformed into a man-made landscape."[147] The city itself is transformed to become the source and container of a number of sublimes – mechanical, technological, electronic, etc. This, in turn, makes it the ideal site for the process of self-making so important to the modern self, especially within the context of a plural society.[148] Unlike the small town or village, anything is possible in the city: 'the sky's the limit.'

In the Superman series, the image of Metropolis displays these characteristics of the city. After all, Clark Kent himself followed the call to the city as well, to the opportunities and

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[145] Kurt Busiek (w), Brent Anderson (p), "My Father's Son," *Astro City* Vol. 2 #9 (May 1997), Image Comics.
[146] Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, 22-23.
[147] Ibid., 37.
[148] Ibid., xiv and 37.

challenges it provides. The move to Metropolis is articulated as a way to move beyond the small-town mentality of "Smallville"– linked often with mediocrity and stagnant small-mindedness – in order to engage a larger reality with seemingly infinite challenges and dilemmas. Smallville might be where Clark Kent finds his moral centre, but it is Metropolis that captures his heart and imagination. But even the image of Metropolis pales in comparison with that of Astro City.

First, the monuments within Astro City are drawn and created to evoke the same response felt in the presence of different well-known American landmarks. Entering into the city, one crosses Outcalt Bridge, which bears more than a passing resemblance to Golden Gate Bridge.[149] The façade of Grandenetti Cathedral, with its Gothic architecture of spires reaching up to the sky, is reminiscent of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York. Within the *Astro City* series of comics the Cathedral spires are drawn in such a way that the very tips are lost from view, suggesting the panel frame itself can't contain its verticality; or it is drawn in such a fashion, with the blue sky framing it overhead, to suggest dizzying height.[150] The Astrobank Tower, as well, serves as a visual marker and orientation within the city similar to the Empire State Building, rising in tiered likeness up into the heavens. Even Shadow Hill looms on the landscape as a dark, old, enchanted, and monstrous counter to the glittering, neo-modern Astro City, evoking both archetypes of the urban superhero sublime: Gotham and Metropolis.

Individuals are transformed by their encounter with the city. Kinney is depicted as lost in wide-eyed wonder as he enters the city by bus, as he senses the infinite possibilities lying before him.[151] Marta of Shadow Hill steps from the bus that takes her from Shadow Hill onto Binderbeck Plaza and is transformed: "replaced by an independent young woman -- a part of the energy and spirit that give the city life."[152] The episode that deals with this theme most explicitly portrays Astro City through the eyes of Ben Pullam, a single father having just moved to the

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[149] See esp. Kurt Busiek (w), Brent Anderson (p), "New Kid In Town," *Astro City* Vol. 2 #4 (December 1996), Image Comics.
[150] Cf. Busiek and Anderson, *Astro City* Vol. 2 #5; Kurt Busiek (w), Brent Anderson (p), "Safeguards," *Astro City* Vol. 1 #4 (November 1995), Image Comics. It is interesting to note that throughout the first two volumes the AstroBank Tower is featured on the inside front cover, seeming to suggest like the Empire State Building, or the Daily Planet, it is the symbol for the city itself.
[151] Busiek and Anderson, *Astro City*, Vol. 2 #4.
[152] Busiek and Anderson, *Astro City*, Vol. 1 #4.

city.[153] The very opening panel has the AstroBank Tower framed against a clear blue sky, pointing upwards to convey the feeling of immensity and height. On the third page, over a narration of the reasons why he moved, is a splash page of the Samaritan fighting against a villain, with "Welcome to Astro City" in the bottom right corner. With the image of the Samaritan a connection is established, paralleled in the dialogue, between the city and the superheroes who inhabit it. Ben explores the city with his two daughters, visiting various monuments, the children acting with the excitement and joy of typical tourists, as the father wonders about the wisdom of coming to Astro City.

That evening, strong winds throw open the windows to the Pullam house, forcing the boundaries of the private sphere open, as a dangerous storm appears in the sky over Astro City. There is a full, double paged image, with lighting cascading all over the sky, the light from the lightning also serving as eyes and mouth for a monstrous entity. The AstroBank Tower pierces up into the sky, up into the entity that dwarfs it. The creature bellows, "You have transgressed against me humans! You have stolen, and you will return that which you stole."[154] Here is a manifestation of wilderness as sublime, the full power and force of nature on display, witnessed from the relative safety of the home by Ben and his children. They watch as the superheroes, the defenders of the city, sweep into action, but even here the wild storm threatens to engulf and overawe human attempts at comprehension; "Flying up at that creature like there's nothing that can stop them -- and I notice something I never thought about before -- that here, seeing them in person like this -- they look so small."[155] Against the grandeur and sublimity of the raw power of the wilderness, the first response is the feeling of smallness and inadequacy.

As the heroes sweep into action, Ben turns to a very modern device in order to keep informed as to what is happening. Searching through his packing boxes, he finds and quickly hooks up a television. The fight goes on, but eventually there is the desire to experience the sublime first hand, without technological mediation. The Pullams go to their apartment roof, where they find themselves surrounded by their neighbours who are already there. Ben stops and thinks "All this violence -- this danger -- and Meg and Faithie -- We can't stay here. We can't

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[153] Kurt Busiek (w), Brent Anderson (p), "Welcome to Astro City," *Astro City* Vol. 2 #1 (September 1996), Homage Comics.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.

stay here." Then, in front of Ben, still fretting about his children, a superhero saves a bystander from death without waiting or needing thanks in return. When all seems lost, victory is snatched out of defeat when the heroes find what had been stolen and return it to the primal storm; "And bang, it's over. The rain comes down gently and warm. And we all look at each other and don't know what to say." The next morning it is not the sun that Ben notes as shining, but the streets. The city clean-up crews are already out, but so too are various people, out helping to pick up trash and set things right. Ben looks around himself and thinks; "Last night was insane. It was horrible. But … watching the heroes … seeing the people today, the city workers, the neighbours … It's dangerous. It's frightening. But words like honour, and trust, and commitment -- they're just words most places. Here … here, they're … What are you teaching them Ben [in reference to his daughters]? What do they need?" With the AstroBank Tower stretching impossibly high in the background, Ben makes a decision: he and his daughters will stay in Astro City. The city, full of possibility, danger, but also opportunities, still has the power to act as the sublime. Like the wilderness, the city is full of 'Excess', but can also point the way for a more encompassing orientation for the self.

In Alan Moore's *Promethea*, too, image plays a crucial role in conveying the sense of the sublime and the monstrous. But for *Promethea*, the connection with the sublime and the movement out of complacency is much more explicit, as they constitute the very purpose of the series. In an interview with Tasha Robinson, Moore speaks of the connection between religion, spirituality and *Promethea*;

> All I would urge people to do in *Promethea* is to explore, in their own way, by whatever means they personally feel comfortable with, using whatever system they happen to feel comfortable with, whether that be Christianity, or paganism, or Hinduism, or anything else, to explore the kind of rich world that I think all of us have inside us. I just want to tell them that the world is there, that there are a variety of ways of exploring it. It doesn't really matter which way you use, or which system you adapt. It's a territory I find very rewarding, very fulfilling, very human. To point out that territory to other people is something I feel very happy about doing.[156]

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[156] Alan Moore, Interviewed by Tasha Robinson, "Alan Moore," A.V. Club, October 24, 2001, http://www.avclub.com/article/alan-moore-13740.

In Moore's *Promethea* it is the human as wilderness, as unmapped territory, that is the source of the sublime and ultimately the transformation of society.

Moore's depiction of Promethea, and J.H. William and Mick Gray's artistic rendering of her, is frequently done in such a way as to invoke a response of awe and grandeur. Indeed, upon first seeing Sophie/Promethea up close Jack Faust is drawn responding with astonishment; "Oh. This … this is awkward. I hadn't expected you to be … to be so wonderful."[157] Sophie's best friend responds with wide-eyed terror at seeing Promethea, quickly replaced with enchanted wonder; "It's like you're living in a fairy tale!"[158] Repeatedly, Sophie/Promethea invokes this sort of response everywhere she goes. People break off what they are doing to stare, suggesting to the reader what our own response might be in such a situation. Repeatedly the eyes of the bystanders convey this mixture of awe and fear. We cannot say if the depiction of the bystanders to Sophie/Promethea might be understood as trying to convey an experience of the sublime – we are not privy to their thoughts, nor their reactions beyond the moment – but as noted before, fear and awe are part of the experience of the sublime. What is more, the breaking out of the everyday that Sophie/Promethea produces in bystanders is set against the backdrop of a sensory rich environment. Neon, lights, and advertising are everywhere in this image of New York, evoking the landscape of the technological sublime. This sensory-rich landscape is made even moreso by the addition of sound and touch to the urban environment though constant "Texture" TV news bulletins permeating the urban scenes of the panels. In this over-saturated urban context, it would take a great deal for the self to break out and be impacted by a new experience or sensation, but that is what Promethea triggers in onlookers whenever they see her. They immediately recognize Promethea as something beyond the norm, beyond the technological world where they exist.

The response by most bystanders to Sophie/Promethea is not surprising given the depiction in both image and text of Sophie/Promethea. Her eyes are pupilless, and she is dressed in garb that mixes the amazon and the goddess. Her caduceus, which is the symbol of her power,

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[157] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "Sex, Stars, and Serpents," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #10 (October 2000), America's Best Comics.
[158] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "The Judgement of Solomon," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #2 (September 1999), America's Best Comics.

constantly appears as a creation of white-blue light with twin, twisting snakes in constant motion. In the material world, more often than not, she is shown as floating or flying rather than walking. Her physical body, too, is constantly described in such a way as to suggest ideals of female beauty, as well as evoking notions of the male gaze. Moore plays with this image here, adding another layer to her appearance. For Moore, Promethea represents the female power in creation, so she is sexualized. However, as the female power, she also nourishes and creates. As one of the few observers who articulates their response to Sophie/Promethea notes; "This is £$%&ed up. I mean, you're like the horniest thing I've ever ***seen***, and … and I feel like I'm talking to my ***mom***."[159] [bold and italics in original] In this context Sophie/Promethea is presented as a figure that evokes responses bordering on the sublime.

This explicit connection to the maternal is especially illuminating given the work done by Kristeva and others of the maternal monstrous. Already in the text there is the recognition of the transgressive through the allusion of incest in the presence of the figure of Promethea. Promethea occupies the liminal areas between whore, mother, and virgin, consciously created to question our assumptions about the feminine, imagination, and sexuality. As Moore himself states, *Promethea* has something of the Trojan horse to it: it is meant to appear on the surface like any other superhero story, but underneath to reveal much more basic questions about our constructions of what is good and evil.[160] But the very image of the sexual maternal, as Jeffrey Brown maintains, is itself transgressive given the nature of the superhero genre.

For Brown, the superhero genre in general is all about boundaries, their maintenance, and their social instruction: what is good and evil, right and wrong, strong and weak, etc. Tied to these, though, are corporeal boundaries, which are challenged by the maternal, pregnant body; "Pregnancy is a sign that the body has been penetrated. The borders of the body have been breached in some manner … The pregnant body also violates principles of discipline and containment in that it becomes a body that bursts forth with increased mass and with various leaking fluids. This changing body challenges cultural notions of corporeal and social

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[159] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "When It Blows Its Stacks," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #27 (November 2003), America's Best Comics.
[160] George Khoury, *The Extraordinary Works of Alan Moore, Indispensible Edition* (Raleigh: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2008), 186.

stability."[161] As Marie Anne Doane notes, "It would seem that the concept of motherhood automatically throws into question ideas concerning the self, boundaries between self and other, and hence identity."[162] Or put even more starkly, "The pregnant body in particular can be monstrous precisely because it indicates a collapse between inside and outside, between self and other."[163] Promethea as maternal, generative, world-birthing, is monstrous precisely because it disturbs the construction of boundaries of the self, challenging – in Taylorian terms – our conceptions of our buffered selves, reminding us of our porousness.[164]

The outward aspect of Promethea's appearance as sublime/monstrous is closely connected to the inward journey of Sophie Banks that serves as the true focal point for the series. This is where Moore's own spiritual journey through occultism and esoteric traditions comes out strongly. Moore wants his readers to engage and go deeper, or at least be shaken out of their own complacency with where they are. Indeed, a frequent motif throughout his works is a serious challenge to traditional notions of the separation of time and space itself. Mark Bernard and James Carter refer to Moore as "… the Picasso of his art when it comes to bridging the fourth dimension".[165] In terms of *Promethea*, beyond sharing his esoteric and mystical beliefs, the graphic novel is also a venue to consciously experiment with a free-flowing conception of time/space, 'Moore explodes the very notion of chronotope by undoing space and time in favor of an absolute "space-time of the imagination," where narrative becomes a site for reflecting on the process of artistic creation.'[166] As Di Liddo notes, Moore accomplishes this through various techniques. Visually, Moore constantly subverts traditional forms and expectations of the medium. On more than one occasion, the comic book reader is compelled to turn the physical

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[161] Jeffrey A Brown, "Supermoms? Maternity and the Monstrous-Feminine in Superhero Comics," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2011), 79.
[162] Marie Anne Doane, "Technophilia: Technology, Representation, and the Feminine," in *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs, and Cyberspace*, ed. Jenny Wolmark (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 27.
[163] Brown, "Supermoms? Maternity and the Monstrous-Feminine in Superhero Comics," 80.
[164] It must also be noted that Moore's treatment of sexuality and the feminine has always contained within it some concerns, namely a too-easy proclivity to connecting – and at times appearing to condone – sexuality and violence. For a good article that addresses some of these concerns in a nuanced way, see Matthew J. A. Green, "She Brings Apocalypse: Sex, Imagination and Redemptive Transgression in William Blake and the Graphic Novels of Alan Moore," *Literature Compass* 8, No. 10 (2011), 739-756.
[165] Mark Bernard and James Bucky Carter, "Alan Moore and the Graphic Novel: Confronting the Fourth Dimension," *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2004), http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v1_2/carter/.
[166] Annalisa Di Liddo, *Alan Moore Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*, 23; cf. 85-102.

book at various angles in order to read what is being said. For example, this technique is used in an image of Sophie/Promethea and Barbara, a former Promethea, discussing the nature of the mind while walking along a mobius strip.[167] In another section, the drawn page slowly morphs into photographic panels in order to emphasize the rich sensations being experienced by Sophie/Promethea within the Immateria.[168] At other times, Moore very consciously breaks the fourth wall of the comic book page: on one page both he and the penciller are drawn separately in such a way as to suggest that Promethea herself is aware of their presence and impact in the story, and in another a character has a 'mystical' experience by breaking out of the panel-like structure of her reality in the comic book itself.[169] It is a very conscious attempt by Moore to challenge the reader to break out of their everyday way of reading and interacting with the art-form of the comic book, in order to reflect and understand the connection between the story they are reading, their imagination, and life itself.[170] The comic book art-form becomes "icon," a way of entering into and experiencing the realities that are being depicted.

Within the continuity of the story, as well, Moore attempts to subvert expectations in order to open up different ways of experiencing the world through the medium. In issue #10, Sophie Banks strives to unlock more of her potential as Promethea, seeking the help of an old magician, Jack Faust, in order to accomplish this. Faust is not the sort of magician that pulls rabbits out of hats, but rather the magician of the Tarot cards, a seeker attempting to bridge heaven and earth. His payment for teaching Sophie about magic is sex with Promethea. This is not just any sexual encounter, but one journeying through the chakras of the body, releasing human potential, and teaching Sophie/Promethea about magic.[171] The lesson Faust teaches relies heavily on tantric thought, and Faust explains through the sexual act how the various chakras of the body are opened, based on the union and breakdown of dualities. As the pair move to explore opening the chakras, the visual elements of the comic book change as well. On the first

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[167] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "Mercury Rising," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #15 (August 2001). America's Best Comics.
[168] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "Rocks and Hard Places," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #7 (April 2000), America's Best Comics.
[169] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "Don't they know it's the end of the world?" *Promethea* Vol. 1 #28 (January 2004), America's Best Comics.
[170] This is seen especially in "Wrap Party," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #32 (April 2005), America's Best Comics, where the reader must physically deface the comic book itself by taking it apart and connecting the sheets together, in order to see the bigger, unified picture(s) Moore is articulating in his last issue.
[171] Moore and Williams, *Promethea* Vol. 1 #10; this issue also won the 2001 Eisner Award for best single issue of a comic book.

page depicting their encounter, instead of traditional frames, the panels are separated by a blossoming pink lotus, the green stems and blooms acting as frames. As the experience intensifies, the word balloons cease, as if the communication is happening at a deeper level than spoken language. The images become more and more psychedelic,[172] abstract, until the moment of climax when consciousness of the physical returns. At the point of climax a double page splash appears, male and female looking outward mirroring each other on either side. Closest to the middle are the star enshrouded figures of the pair, forming one body with 6 arms. Immediately on either side, just behind this primary form, are Promethea and Jack Faust as robed magician, representing their functions. Behind them are Sophie as just Sophie and Faust as just Faust, but behind these representations are Hathar and Horus, and Sekhmet and Ptah. Behind all, a pair of heavenly snakes twist out and through the double pages. For Moore the double snakes representing not only esoteric wisdom, but the wisdom bound within the twisting, snake-like double helix of human DNA. Then the pair returns to reality. Through their encounter, Sophie has been opened up to a much wider world; she has had an erotic/religious encounter with the sublime.

When this encounter is over, Sophie is still interested in learning more about magic, with Faust beginning to guide her on the way. Ultimately, Sophie/Promethea seeks direction from the sacred snakes on her caduceus. As the snakes reveal truths to Promethea, the reader is drawn deeper into a break of form that explores the transformation of Promethea, and perhaps us as readers. The form of the comic here is virtually impossible to describe in a concise manner, except to say that images and text merge and flow throughout the pages.[173] All of issue #12, where this transfiguration takes place, consists of double page splashes that flow into one another. An interesting combination of words and image, words becoming image, is accomplished by words being formed through Scrabble pieces. Through it all, Sophie floats and dances, as the snakes explain how the Tarot unlocks paths into the understanding of existence. Seeking to force the reader into a deeper and more difficult engagement with this message, Moore constructs several concurrent stories to be weaved together and engage one another across

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[172] Regarding the idea of the psychedelic, in the last issue of *Promethea* Moore waxes, "Promethea, the Promethea Moth's namesake, represents humanity's evolving soul; what ancient Greeks first named our "psyche". Adding "delos" (to reveal), Humphrey Osmond, a colleague of Aldous Huxley coined "psychedelic" or "soul-revealing".'

[173] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "The Magic Theatre: A Pop Art Happening," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #12 (February 2001), America's Best Comics.

the pages. At the topmost level the snakes talk, explaining to Sophie the Tarot. At another level of the panel, Sophie tries to interact with the snakes but her questions are taken up within the snakes' dialogue in a manner where it is not clear if the snakes are addressing her, or just speaking – either to each other or expositing for the reader. A third thread in the panels involves a story that runs along the bottom of the pages that appears to have little directly to do with what the snakes are saying. This is combined with a fourth thread with the images of the Tarot themselves. The reader is left with the difficult and confusing task of arranging the images to connect in some tenuous way with the text on the page, as is fitting with traditional conceptions of reading comics, but the level of difficulty and ambiguity alter the nature of this exercise. The reader is not alone in this confusion, Sophie/Promethea commenting at one point; "I'm sorry. I'm having difficulty keeping the different threads separate."[174] Sophie's difficulty at encountering what is in essence an attempt to account for the rich complexity of existence, is mirrored and reflected back to the reader. As she accounts for this grandeur, initially overwhelmed by it, but eventually feeling the joy and expanse at having grasped these new revelations, the reader is invited to participate in this same sublime-like encounter.

These two instances, however, pale in comparison to Sophie/Promethea's journey into the collective imagination of mankind, and up through the sephirot that forms the bulk of the series. This event, Sophie/Promethea's journey, runs through 10 issues out of 32, issues #14-23, establishing its centrality to the narrative. Key to the journey is the concept of the Immateria already touched upon in the previous chapter. For Moore's purposes, the Immateria is "a place where fictions and symbols are all that's real,"[175] and as such are all the more real. "All myths are true, Sophie. Given that they last longer, they're even truer than the so-called real world."[176]

What is occurring with the Immateria is entirely immanent, and is made up of the human imagination, which is the central concept for *Promethea* as a whole. Indeed, playing on Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, Moore has Promethea explain; "I'm the idea of the human imagination … which, when you think about it, is the only thing we can really agree isn't

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[174] Ibid.
[175] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "A Faerie Romance," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #4 (November 1999), America's Best Comics.
[176] Moore and Williams, *Promethea* Vol. 1 #7

imaginary."[177] Here, the imagination trumps rationality, as rationality is only one part of a larger whole. In the end, it is imagination that is the source of everything we understand as part of reality, both physically and mentally as Promethea explains near the end of the series:

> See, I'm imagination. I'm real and I'm the best friend you ever had. Who do you think got you all this cool stuff? The clothes you're wearing, the room, the house, the city that you're in. Everything in it started out in the human imagination. Your lives, your personalities, your whole world, all invented. All made up. All the wars, the romances, the masterpieces and the machines. And there's nothing here but a funny little twist of amino acids, playing a marvellous game of pretend. Nothing here but me and you. Me and you little lifesnake. By the fire where we've always been since this room was a cave. Do you remember? When you first thought you saw things in the flames? In the dancing shadows … and you needed me to tell you a tale. A story grand and glorious.[178]

At the core of this experience is her journey through the *sephirot*, Sophie/Promethea moving from place to place until she encounters the sublime, which results in a new vision of the world. The Immateria as the territory of the self, as interior place, requires a map to be able to effectively traverse.[179] This map is provided by the various products of the human imagination that have sought to grasp a wider reality. In this context kabbalah, tarot, and astrology all serve as helpful roadmaps on the journey of explanation. As these systems are shared, they become locations where other minds can dwell – human minds and the minds of gods, angels and demons. As Sophie/Promethea travels up the sephirot, journeying from place to place, it is natural for her to meet others. However, this whole sublime journey is premised on place, in encountering the particular geographical features that manifest mental realities. For instance, the incident with the two Prometheas walking and talking on the mobius strip is found in the '8'th sphere of the sephirot, *hod*, which is also linked to the astrological symbol of Mercury. It represents language and the intellect, and can also lead to logical tautologies that ultimately lead

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[177] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "The Radiant Heavenly City," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #31 (October 2004), America's Best Comics.
[178] Ibid.
[179] As it is described in Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "Weapon for Liberty," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #5 (February 2000), America's Best Comics; "So … like the Immateria … It's a map of what's inside people, not just the universe beyond them? / Margaret/Promethea: The worlds inside and outside us have the same structure, the same pattern. Journeying even beyond the intellectual idea of shape or form, we next traverse the rich venusian landscape of emotion."

nowhere, namely the mobius strip. Sophie/Promethea and Barbara, her companion, have to force themselves off the path, off safe ways of thinking, in order to move forward. Artistically, this is also a realm of quicksilver, with the environment changing as fast as thought. However, Sophie/Promethea does not stop there but continues up, each sphere of the sephirot journeyed through, blending various occult and popular images into the landscape, suggesting a topographical representation, as it were, of the mind and imagination itself.

This whole journey proceeds until Sophie/Promethea reaches the top of the sephirot, the tree of life, and merges into the white-gold bliss of Oneness, of God. Sophie/Promethea and her companions repeatedly slip in and out of that Oneness and consciousness, represented graphically by them fading in and out of a white background. The entire journey prepares us for this sublime encounter, Sophie/Promethea's third eye is drawn as awakened. It is awe-inspiring, expansive, full of an 'Excess' of meaning, with images and words both trying to convey precisely this impression of excess. Once the experience has occurred and is understood, she is able and prepared to re-enter the world with a new, wider orientation. As one of the characters explains; "when we choose to descend from this sacred purity, back into the turmoil and suffering of the world, then we're doves. The dove is the will to sacrifice, to descend. The will to die. The will to die to this glorious world of spirit, and live again in matter … The will to take a little more light back down into the world that needs it."[180] All of this is premised on place, on the encounter with something or someone that occupies the same space as the self. This encounter is rooted in place, in an encounter inside space, providing an orientation to our place as we are now. It gives the self a sense of magnetic north. Moore's *Promethea* serves to underscore the vital link between the sublime and specific spaces in which the self dwells.

After the journey, Sophie and her companions return to the physical world. This underscores and sets up, however, a second crucial element of Moore's series related to the sublime. Underlying the idea of the sublime as place, is the sublime as encounter. In the sublime as encounter, physical location can serve this role as things encountered, but so can people. People, outside the self, can re-orient the self, giving one a new sense of place. Within *Promethea* it is this personal encounter as sublime that is the most important, literally bringing about the 'end of the world'. This end of the world, however, is very different than traditionally

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[180] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "The Serpent and the Dove," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #23 (December 2002), America's Best Comics.

imagined. It is an end of the world not generated from the outside world, but from within. Even more, traditional manifestations of the end of the world such as demons, are generated by internal expectations and dreams. At the heart of all of this is Promethea.

The final moment of transformation is triggered innocuously. Sophie/Promethea and others are huddled in Sophie's mother's house, fearing the prophecy that Sophie/Promethea would bring about the end of the world, but not knowing what to expect. Sophie's mother dips a stir stick into a glass of water. As her inconspicuous wand stirs the maternal waters in her cup, the mystery unfolds. The point of view of the story shifts away from Promethea and those close to her. She is now the one to be encountered, rather than the one encountering. As chaos is happening out on the streets, we are drawn inside – inside ourselves, but also inside the safety of home – to Promethea. Reminiscent of the beginning of the series when the imagination was likened to a house, Promethea walks to a room in what appears to be a place with an infinite number of rooms. She walks and sits beside the fire, evoking connections between fire, story-telling and imagination, but also maternal care and the comfort of home.

This is a very different image of the end of the world. As Promethea states; "This happens to everybody. This is how the world ends."[181] However, this is an end of the world that is intensely personal; "I think we all have to be alone for this. I think the end of the world is personal." This is not personal in the sense that we all face death alone, however, but personal in a relational way. We are drawn inside the home as the world we know ends, to a room beside the fire, and there we are recognized; "Ah, it's you. Good. I've been waiting a long time to talk to you."[182] This line is repeated exactly three different times. The first is when the mechanical killer the Painted Doll comes to Promethea, the second against a backdrop of a blue, expanding map of the world, and the third at the beginning of issue 3 as we watch a stream of people – real, imaginary, and dead – making their way to the room and an encounter with Promethea. Moore uses the moment to expand for five double splash pages on his philosophy of life, and in the end the world wakes up. This is not an end of the world in fire and brimstone, but through a great Devonian leap forward. As Andrew Arnold notes regarding the series *Promethea*, "where most

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[181] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "Valley of the Dolls," *Promethea* Vol. 1 #29 (May 2004), America's Best Comics.
[182] Alan Moore (w), J.H. Williams III (p), "Everything Must Go!" *Promethea* Vol. 1 #30 (July 2004), America's Best Comics.

conventional superhero books present some sort of evil to be overcome, this series depicts the overcoming of reality."[183] It is through the sublime encounter with Promethea that the self is awakened and oriented to a new world where separation is the illusion, even separation between the real, material world and that of immaterial thoughts, memories and imagination. In such a world the dead literally walk among us inasmuch as we hold on to them through thought and memory.

This chapter began with a discussion of Taylor's moral sources arising out of his understanding of a disenchanted universe that has shaped modern experience of the self. Taylor identifies two such moral sources – the sublime and humanity's dark genesis – but spends considerably less time on the sublime in *A Secular Age*, than he does on an evolutionary connection to humanity's dark genesis. One can be left with the impression after reading *A Secular Age* that the sublime is not really part of the modern experience of self. However, given the strong philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic connections to issues of the sublime through the 20th century, it is a perception that is difficult to reconcile with that of the surrounding culture. The motif of the sublime is drawn out even more strongly in the superhero source material. Elements of a prior wilderness sublime can still be found, but now transferred to the urban setting as seen in Superman's image of Metropolis, *Promethea*'s neon technological sublime of a city, and most especially in the depiction of the city found in *Astro City*. The urban environment is not the only inheritor of the wilderness sublime, but also the shared world of the imagination described in *Promethea* through the image of the Immateria. The image is one not found within the self, but rather shared amongst all. The true locus of the imagination is presented here not as within the self, but outside in a shared world with others.

Beyond the wilderness sublime, though, the superhero genre also connects with the deep stream in 20th century thought revolving around the idea of the Other as orientating the self outwards. The Other, as threatening the identity of the self, can appear as both God-like – as sublime – but also monstrous. The image of the monstrous Other is seen especially in the Superman family of comics, aided by the liminal status of Superman-as-alien, but is also identified throughout the superhero genre in representations of our fears of Otherness, especially

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[183] Andrew D. Arnold, "Pow! Biff! Enlightenment!" *Time Magazine* (Friday, Nov. 22, 2002), http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,393217,00.html.

in those things that push against our self-identity as buffered selves. If the superhero genre, as Brown maintains, revolves significantly around boundary maintenance, it only follows that the conflict inherent within that maintenance is a key source of discussion and exploration. The fear, the lurking monstrous, is that we are not nearly as buffered against the world as we have imagined. These themes would appear then as a direct challenge to Taylor's own insistence on the buffered self as the hallmark of the modern self.

As also noted, though, there is a stream within the superhero genre – connected in this study with the X-men family of comics and later Superman issues – that precisely seeks to affirm the self against the possible fear of a monstrous Other that threatens to seep through our buffered boundaries. The X-men figure of Cyclops is an example: if I can contain the sublime, my buffered self and will is strong enough to contain anything. This is an interesting development, and one that needs further exploration in connection with Taylor's work. Taylor might indeed be right to locate the buffered self as a key feature of the modern 'conditions of lived experience,' but perhaps not in the way he has articulated it in *A Secular Age*. The buffered self, as buffered and bounded, is only as strong as the boundaries that surround it. If I create other buffered selves, even in my own thinking, then my own buffered self is reinforced. However, what Taylor does not seem to adequately account for are those images and fears that refuse to be bound; that refuse to be contained within the logic of a buffered self. Images of monsters, the monstrous, but also the sublime, lurk at the edges of the self, looking for ways to break in. The popularity within the 20th century of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and superheroes seem to indicate a concern, beyond a mere frisson, that we are not as buffered as we might image. In such experiences, the buffered self does offer something important to human person, but is never fully freed from the need to constantly construct its boundaries. In such a view, the buffered self is not something that has been achieved, but something constantly fought towards. The moral source of the sublime, with its outward-looking orientation, and the inward-looking focus on our 'dark genesis', go hand in hand in order to frame the experience of the modern self.

# Conclusion

At its base, Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* is an attempt to draw out the history of the change from "… a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."[1] *A Secular Age* is not a history in the traditional sense, though, but rather an attempt to articulate and elucidate key components of the narrative experience of the modern self. The narrative Taylor traces, like all stories, is a narrative with a purpose: to try and uncover, understand, and make sense, not of the *history* of a certain secularity, but the perception, result, and impact of that history upon conceptions of self and society. He is trying to articulate the modern 'conditions of lived experience' within the modern, North Atlantic world.

There is a clear continuity between this project and his earlier effort to excavate the sources of the modern self in *Sources of the Self*. However, there are also crucial differences between these two works. In *Sources of the Self*, the emphasis was on the ways in which continental thought and culture shaped the creation of the modern self, but the onus was on tracing the historical development of that self. One can agree, for example, that the Romantic Movement played a major role shaping our sense of the self. It is far more difficult, though, to claim that Romantic ideas underlie and shape in very particular and fundamental ways the lived experience of the individual across North Atlantic culture, regardless of their nationality, race, gender, or class. That is the task of *A Secular Age*: to argue that the lived conditions of experience of the modern self are not only shaped by historical developments, but that the experience of the modern, North Atlantic self is bound within a certain frame of experiencing the world.

Taylor is aware of the limits of his study. In *A Secular Age,* and in his responses to the discussion that it has provoked, Taylor emphasizes the fact that this work is provisional: a series

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[1] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

of interlocking essays, hypotheses offered up to be put to the test.[2] As interlocking hypotheses, the reactions to Taylor have been varied. His introduction of the idea of the 'immanent counter-enlightenment' and an evolutionary 'dark genesis' as critical sources in shaping the modern experience of the self provide interesting and potentially useful conceptual tools for future discourse. His rejection of subtraction theories of secularization seems largely in line with much of current scholarship, especially within the field of religion and media, which has largely abandoned subtraction theories of secularization. His construction of the "immanent frame" also seems to have received broad acceptance. His conception of 'disenchantment' and the position of his triad of transcendental theism, exclusive humanism, and the immanent counter-enlightenment within the public sphere appear to be some of the most contentious positions advanced in his argument. While much attention has been spent on Taylor's understanding of disenchantment, little attention has been given to his presentation of the sublime and its impact on Taylor's notion of the buffered self. In raising questions regarding disenchantment and the sublime, questions are also raised regarding the salience of Taylor's conception and use of disenchantment and especially the buffered self.

Taylor's insistence on the existence *and priority* of the buffered self is problematic in this regard. According to Taylor, we live in a disenchanted world of buffered selves: that is the default position of the lived experience of the modern self. In virtually every response to critics, his conception of the buffered self and its priority is reaffirmed against challenges by his interlocutors. In 2009, in response to a critique of *A Secular Age* by Karl Smith regarding buffered and porous selves Taylor notes; "In the way I use the porous/buffered distinction, we are all now buffered agents." However, he does note that does not mean there is no possibility for re-enchantment, but that these possibilities always build upon our already disenchanted position.[3] In 2010, in response to a series of critiques by various authors engaging *A Secular Age* in the *Journal of Religion*, Taylor introduces a theme that he will continue to advance in other responses to critics, namely that the push for disenchantment produced a counter-movement to re-enchantment in the modern world, and that the core of this counter-movement can be found in Romantic artists, writers, and thinkers.[4] In this response, Taylor acknowledges difficulties in his

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[2] See especially Taylor, "Challenging Issues about the Secular Age," 411.
[3] Charles Taylor, "Reply," *Thesis Eleven*, Vol. 99, No. 1 (November 1, 2009), 95.
[4] Ibid.

construction of the notions of disenchantment/re-enchantment, and the porous/buffered dichotomy in *A Secular Age*. However, Taylor insists that disenchantment and the buffered self now constitute the normative reality of the Western self. While there may be attempts at re-enchantment and an opening up of the self, it is always in the context of an established, disenchanted, buffered subject; "this [re-enchanted] range of senses is not the original one, however difficult it is to situate them in relation to it."[5]

Taylor returns to these issues again in his response to a roundtable discussion of *A Secular Age* by Alex Andrews, Floyd Dunphy and Sarah Azaransky in the journal *Political Theology*. Here, Taylor shifts his focus to the question of the 'conditions of lived experience' when describing the significance of disenchantment and the buffered self; "My point was that disenchantment did not consist in a change of *beliefs*, but rather a shift in which immediate experience was reconfigured, … More, it's not clear how such a return [to the naïve experience of porousness] could be effected." [italics in original][6] Taylor continues to press this idea that our very conditions of our lived experience of the world were changed in a response to Hent de Vries in *Modern Theology* also in 2010; 'One very important distinction for me was "naïve" versus "buffered". Here I wanted to grasp the very important shift which amounts to "disenchantment". … What changes is our way of being in, experiencing the world.'[7]

Taylor's response to critics in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (2010), continues this line by reasserting, rather than qualifying, his argument for the priority of the buffered self as the locus of experience. It seems that certain core conclusions are becoming less "provisional" as Taylor responds to his critics. In re-articulating "the story" of the modern self, Taylor asserts: 'We are "buffered" selves. We have changed.'[8] Taylor adds that this shift involves a clear break with previous forms of experience, "Looked at my way, the process of disenchantment involves a change in sensibility; one is open to different things. One has lost a way in which people used to experience the world."[9]

Taylor recognizes that in this process of disenchantment there are tensions and ambiguities, again noting the influence of the Romantics in providing what appears to be, for

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[5] Taylor, "Reply to Schweiker et al," 405.
[6] Taylor, "Charles Taylor's Response to a Roundtable Discussion of His Book a Secular Age," 300.
[7] Taylor, "Challenging Issues About the Secular Age," 415.
[8] Taylor, "Afterwards: Apologia Pro Libro Suo," 303.
[9] Ibid.

Taylor, the sole site in the quest for modern forms of re-enchantment. However, Romantic re-enchantment can never quite undo the buffered nature of the modern self: "… it is clear that the poetry of Wordsworth, or of Novalis, or that of Rilke, cannot come close to the original experience of porous selves."[10] The Gothic, with its emphasis on the power of dark places, ruins, and powers beyond human knowledge, which arose alongside the Romantic Movement, is never mentioned or discussed. Schiller wrote *On the Aesthetic Education of a Man*, which Taylor uses as a prime example of the Romantic period; Schiller also wrote, *The Ghost-Seer*, a fact Taylor ignores. Milton and Blake, who Matthew Green notes play a special role in Alan Moore's enchanted view of the world,[11] receive scant attention in Taylor's account – there is one mention of Blake in *A Secular Age*, and no reference to either figure anywhere else in Taylor's responses to his critics. These gaps raise the possibility that Taylor is basing his conclusions regarding disenchantment and the buffered nature of the modern self on a very selective use of sources from modern culture. "Recovering the Sacred" and "Disenchantment-Reenchantment," both published in 2011, follow the same line of counter-argument; 'We can't go back. Mainly because the enchanted world is a matter of experience. Our buffered selves can't return to "porous" status.'[12]

However, this is not the final word Taylor has on these questions. There are some equivocations. In response to a special addition devoted to *A Secular Age* in the *Australian Journal of Anthropology* in 2011 Taylor presents a somewhat different and more qualified approach to the topic, arguing that he is speaking to a particular cultural context. It is worthwhile to quote him in length here:

> The description of the secular age in terms of the 'immanent' frame was an attempt to describe the social imaginary shared by most people in the mainstream societies of the West: Western Europe, the USA, Canada, and Australia. But these societies are not inhabited by fully 'buffered' identities. There are many people within them that share certain experiences of the enchanted age that preceded them, who sense themselves to be in a world of forces, and sometimes act that way (e.g., by carrying out what others consider 'superstitious' rituals), even though they might not want to declare a belief in these forces. But (ii) more

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[10] Ibid., 304.
[11] Matthew J. A. Green, "She Brings Apocalypse: Sex, Imagination and Redemptive Transgression in William Blake and the Graphic Novels of Alan Moore," 739-756.
[12] Taylor, "Recovering the Sacred," 115.

> importantly, there are a number of societies which are on the edge of the West, as it were, where the same social imaginary is not (yet) dominant, like Poland, Mexico and, it appears, Malta, in other worlds, where the normative understanding of human agency is not simply modelled on the buffered self. It is common to consider these societies as in transition, as 'not yet' fully secularised. But this kind of prediction is very hazardous. Just as societies which are central to the 'West' differ greatly among themselves, so the possibilities of belonging politically to the 'West' while developing in a sometime different direction cannot be foreclosed. We just don't know. We can make the history of secularity in the west, but not predict its future.[13]

Here, in response to an audience of anthropologists whose task it is to try and understand those 'conditions of lived experience' within various cultures throughout the world, including the North Atlantic world, Taylor seems aware that the descriptive power of his conceptions of buffered/porous and disenchantment/re-enchantment appears suspect. At the very least, his presentation is not as encompassing as many of his claims would suggest.

There are three elements in Taylor's response to his critics that are relevant to the concerns of this thesis. First, and most basically, as it also forms the basis of this entire thesis, is the claim that the arguments in *A Secular Age* are, indeed, hypotheses, waiting for testing. Taylor concedes that he is willing to modify and adjust his arguments based upon new information. The field of anthropology provides him information beyond that of Taylor's own disciplinary areas, and so Taylor embraces the possibility of incorporating these perspectives into his larger narrative. However, he does so in a way that reasserts the salience of his account for a very important cultural context, modern Western culture. Second, anthropology is a different field with a different approach. Taylor's approach operates most comfortably within a particular context of philosophical or intellectual history, which operates out of a context based on one's own experience. Taylor seems to recognize that the experience of others – especially of disenchantment – might not be the same in other meta-cultural or civilizational contexts. Third, an underlying focus in Taylor's argument is the stress on the need for the existence of a buffered self as a basis for moral decision-making. This theme comes up regularly in his response to his critics.[14] In these responses there seems to be a tension between Taylor's stated desire to

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[13] Charles Taylor, "Response," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2011), 128.
[14] Seen especially in his responses, "Afterwards: Apologia pro Libro Suo," "Recovering the Sacred," and "Disenchantment/Reenchantment."

examine the 'conditions of lived experience,' which would entail a descriptive account of the modern self, and a temptation to offer a prescriptive injunction to moral behaviour based upon a conception of the buffered self and its ability to make strong and weak evaluations.

This dissertation can be seen as trying to address at least two of these concerns. In response to Taylor's invitation to test his theses, the superhero genre has been utilized as a significant expression of cultural forms with which Taylor appears neither familiar nor comfortable. Arguably these popular genres represent an important articulation of certain conditions of the modern self. However, seen through the lens of the superhero genre, the modern self turns out to be a very different entity than that which appears to serve as Taylor's model.

Continuing along the second point, Taylor's expression of the 'conditions of lived experience' appears shaped in large measure by his own experience. That experience, with a resonance towards forms of culture that can be characterized as those of a European-influenced intellectual with a bias towards Romanticism, is not a context shared by all. My own frame of experience is a case in point. Contra Taylor's presentation of the self in *A Secular Age*, I grew up with the context of North American Evangelical Christianity, a prominent cultural form in North American. The evangelical world that I grew up in was a world that was magical and enchanted at every turn. [15] I was aware of outside powers beyond me, and their ability to influence me. My mother stressed, in warning about Ouija boards, tarot cards, and other occult paraphernalia, that if you never touched them, they couldn't hurt you. Coming from a certain evangelical, Protestant background, the devil and evil spirits were real. They were a real and present danger through the mere proximity and power of *objects*, not just minds. Objects held power to influence the self, for the self to lose control and go down a dangerous path. Places, too, held such power. A baseball diamond held terror, not just because of a peculiar incompetence at the individual sport of baseball, but because that incompetence and the

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[15] Several books already mentioned in this study make similar arguments, especially in connection with the "dark side" of evangelical Christianity within the American context. Lynn Schofield Clark's *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural*, Victoria Nelson's *Gothicka: Vampire Heroes, Human Gods, and the New Supernatural*, and Edward Ingebretsen's *Maps of Heaven, Maps of Hell: Religious Terror as Memory from the Puritans to Stephen King*, among others, develop the connection between American evangelical Protestantism and a fascination with Gothic elements of horror and the supernatural. Ingebretsen's work especially develops the idea that the realm of horror and the supernatural became terrain by which American culture both located what was good, but also what was outside the boundaries of acceptable culture.

withering shame associated with it, spilled out into any activity that took place there. It became a place to avoid. There were boundaries, in that one could choose not to associate with those objects and places or push back against them, but it was only after the recognition of the power of objects and places to get inside and permeate the self. The buffered self, such as it was, was always and only a construction against such influences, and that only ever skin deep. There was always something beyond the self, pushing, making itself known. This world of experience was not a disenchanted one, but one where the strength of the buffered self could only be maintained by constant vigilance. It was only later in life that I began to break out and push back from this condition of lived experience. I did not learn re-enchantment out of an already disenchanted world: I learned to disenchant the world.

Turning back towards the specific context of superhero comics, it must be noted that Taylor does identify critical elements that resonate within the modern experience, especially the phenomenon of disenchantment and the move to re-enchantment. The history of Superman, for instance, can largely be read within this frame as a movement away from a 'naïve', child-like reading of the character pre-Byrne, to a 'heroic' disenchantment that rendered meaning questionable and heralded a darker character. The death of Superman was a high water mark in this movement of disenchantment, but also heralded a desire for re-enchantment too. Taylor's presentation then does buttress and provide historical context for patterns of development that have been explored by various academic studies of the superhero genre. Also, Taylor's description of the buffered self resonates with the conception of self in the X-men series of comics. This series, focused on issues of identity, does seem to lead to the need for strong conceptions of the self.

The discussion also noted various ways in which the material seems to better support Taylor's openness to anthropological concerns for a more nuanced view of enchantment and the buffered self. Strong traces of magic and a primary enchanted view appear to still remain within these streams of popular culture. Some of these traces can be seen in the unquestioning assumption of the efficacy of magic, the acceptance of superstition as real, as well as a view that reveres science and technology itself working in analogous ways to magic.[16] *Promethea*

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[16] Taylor might make the claim that in principle, if we wanted we could pursue the answer through science and see the horizontal cause and effect between things, while those who lived in the enchanted world could not. This would seem to beg the question of whether or not there was even anything remotely resembling medieval science, or if

probably goes furthest in raising questions about the assumptions of both disenchantment/re-enchantment as well as buffered/porous selves. With the use of idea of the Immateria and the subversion of the 'end of the world' trope, Moore presents an image of the self that is still capable of individual responsibility, but one that sees in our porousness in relation to others as a critical feature of our experience, rather than a relic of the past. Moore suggests the need for a Devonian leap as it were, precisely out of a notion of the disenchanted buffered individual, to one where everyone is interconnected through their very thoughts and imagination. The buffered self appears, for Moore, not to offer a necessary precondition for moral responsibility in the modern context, but a real hindrance. However, through the idea of the Immateria, Taylor's notion of disenchantment as linked to an emphasis on the priority of mind and subjectivity is also strengthened. The subject itself becomes what shapes the world.

The most serious gap, though, appears to be Taylor's neglect of the category of the sublime as a modern moral source. This is striking, as well as odd. The sublime, especially in its aesthetics, technological, and urban manifestations is still a very prominent concern in academic discourse. Nye and Bukatman in particular show ways in which the urban environment have taken over much of the role played by the wilderness of the 18th century, especially within the context of the American experience. This is borne out as well in the source material examined in this thesis. In series such as *Astro City* the city itself is a source of wonder and orientation for the self. People move to the city, are drawn to it, and challenged by it, a spatial expression of the sublime that Taylor identifies in the Romantic response to the wilderness. Furthermore, the superhero genre points to transformations of the sublime in two directions: Gothic sensibility and philosophical ethics. This combination results in a very powerful dimension of the sublime: the monstrous Other – potentially monstrous *because* it is Other, forever challenging the self and its own identity. Monsters and supervillains, but also superheroes themselves, challenge the boundary of the self, ever pressing in upon it, threatening,

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science sprang ready-made only with the advent of disenchantment? The vast majority of historians would seem to answer that question in the negative, pointing out the origins of modern science in the Middle Ages if not before. But if that is the case, then in a similar way to a modern, a medieval could theoretically pursue cause and effect along an analogous way as moderns do. The answers might be different, yes, given the cultural context, but there is no reason to imagine the process would not be similar. If the image is that the vast majority of the people in the enchanted world did not seek such answers, then a similar question of the modern can also be asked. The question is an open one, open to the likelihood that for many moderns technology and science might indeed function socially in analogous ways Taylor's 'magic' did for the enchanted age. As noted in this dissertation already, we must be careful to compare like with like or risk misinterpretation of both the past and the present.

making demands. The pressure against this boundary, between the self and other, makes one aware of something outside, constantly challenging the constructed boundaries of the self. In this way, the self is oriented outward, able to locate oneself in space – a key component identified by Taylor as part of the sublime. Taylor neglects this aspect almost completely in *A Secular Age* in favour of what he calls 'humanity's dark genesis': an orientation that instead of reaching out, finds disturbing sources of self deep within oneself.

For Taylor, the buffered self is linked repeatedly to the ability to make strong and weak evaluations, which is a key part of his conception of moral agency. This is also linked, however, to a narrative, Ricoeurian sense of self that seeks to unite the responsibility to others and the responsibility and right of one's self. Despite its focus on certain portrayals of the monstrous, this integration is at the heart of Kearney's work in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*.[17] Indeed, Taylor even praises Kearney's work, "… you show how the modern position of closure can deconstruct itself and open out again in all kinds of interesting ways."[18] But inasmuch as the buffered self creates a boundary between the self and what is outside, it is also open to being deconstructed, the walls broken down, with the buffered self being vulnerable and porous. The buffered self, then, as a construction, is a fragile construction forever being re-constructed, its boundaries being shored up. There would seem to be the need to operate forever between the two, between a buffered and a porous self. As a self in constant narrative construction, the narrative is never closed and so the process of self-identity is never finished: narrative is not only concerned with making sense of the past self, but the future self. As our discussion of the superhero has indicated, this fear of the self as porous to the future is a prevalent feature of modern society, seen in the superhero genre.

The need for constant construction of a fragile buffered self, however, leaves the self vulnerable to outside forces, which Taylor identifies as one of the reasons for the rise of the buffered self in the first place. But being in this state of vulnerability is not always a pleasant place to live. There is a desire to shore up the defences of the self by minimizing the threat of the sublime other. The X-men's movement away from the sublime to a reinforcing of the power

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[17] Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, 229-232.
[18] Charles Taylor, "On Social Imaginaries," in *Traversing the Imaginary: Richard Kearney and the Postmodern Challenge*, ed. Peter Gratton and John Panteleimon Manoussakis (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 46.

of the self, in this way, suddenly makes sense. Superman, too, moves in this direction, both seeking to force the other into the mould of a buffered self, which can then be negotiated with or ignored. Taylor's identification of the buffered self as a key, constituent aspect of the modern self might be less descriptive of the 'conditions of lived experience,' then prescriptive of the desire for the self to rid itself of the spectre of its fragile vulnerability.

If closure is always poised to open itself up again into new positions, as Kearney suggests, it is then also important to see how the buffered self might be deconstructed. Or rather, in the context of the conclusion of this dissertation, what is the monstrous other that the buffered self fears? What is the monster that lurks as the shadow of buffered identity? As Picart and Greek note, theories regarding the monster within society 'may be summarized in the following way: the monster's body is a "cultural body" that serves as a harbinger of "category crisis," which renders porous categories of knowledge and form and makes fluid the realms of fear and desire.'[19] If, as Taylor argues, the buffered self is a central cultural construction of our lived experience, or at least a strong motivating desire, then the monster serves to show in what ways the buffered self is itself in crisis.

In this context, if for Taylor the buffered self is bounded and buffered against the outside world, then the fear is something that can puncture through that barrier, get into the self, get into the very life, mind, even blood of the self, altering it. Indeed, getting into the self, can so transforms it as to take away all moral responsibility. Something, for instance, that could penetrate the skin thick wall of the self, invading us until we lose ourselves. The modern image of the vampire represents such a fear. However, in the domestication of the vampire in such media as the *Twilight* series, we also see attempts to resist the monster, or rather to domesticate the monster and make it familiar – to transform the Other into the Same. In such a way, the vampire becomes one more buffered self, with understandable agendas, interests, and even thoughts – they can succumb to reason. There is then a double barrier – both one's own and the vampire's buffered self – that protects and inures us from our vulnerability to those things that go bump in the night. Indeed, we even have an ally in that battle.

In another image from the buffered self's nightmares, we can imagine something that violently rips through the walls constructed by the self, penetrating with something that infects

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[19] Caroline Joan Picart and Cecil E. Greek, "Introduction: Toward a Gothic Ciminology," in *Monsters in and among Us: Toward a Gothic Criminology*, 12-13.

our very blood and life source. Something then festers within, some sort of plague or disease, that completely takes away rational choice. What is put in its place is irrational hunger. Fifty years ago that hunger took the form of a slow, methodical creature of inexorable, mechanized hunger wearing away our sense of individuality. Now, it is the ravenous hunger of an economic system that knows no bounds, devouring, spawning, making the many one in order to feed itself. The horror of the modern zombie, in its many variations speaks volumes here. Or alternatively, the image of a self allowing the self to be penetrated, sliced open, and cut apart to be replaced by something potentially better, but not entirely human: a cyborg, the quest for the transhuman. Where our monstrous nightmares might take us in the future is yet to be seen.

If this is the case, then, Taylor might provide important orientations along other lines than regarding issues of secularity and the role of religion in the public sphere. By providing a *particular* narrative of the modern self, we can see more clearly the reasons for the fascination with the monsters and aliens that lurk just beyond our view, in a world that disenchantment keeps at bay, at least until the lights go out. In such a world it is no accident that the vampire, zombie, and cyborg are so influential for vast swathes of our North Atlantic culture, especially North America. Threatened so, it might be equally understandable that to excise such monsters, such immanent threats to our identity, we need myths of beings – of new gods – with the power to defeat these dangers. Beings with powers far beyond that of the buffered self, powers that might be called superhuman. However, these seductively attractive superheroes that populate the comic genre also signal our innate cultural awareness of the profoundly precarious and fragile nature of the modern buffered self – they fight our monsters, but those monsters are still ultimately our own.

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