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Growing up with Vertigo: British Writers, DC, and the Maturation of American Comic Books

Derek Salisbury
University of Vermont

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**GROWING UP WITH VERTIGO: BRITISH WRITERS, DC, AND THE
MATURATION OF AMERICAN COMIC BOOKS**

A Thesis Presented

by

Derek A. Salisbury

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

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For the Degree of Master of Arts
Specializing in History**

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Thesis Examination Committee:

_____ Advisor
Abigail McGowan, Ph.D

Melanie Gustafson, Ph.D

_____ Chairperson
Elizabeth Fenton, Ph.D

_____ Dean, Graduate College
Domenico Grasso, Ph.D

March 22, 2013

Abstract

At just under thirty years the serious academic study of American comic books is relatively young. Over the course of three decades most historians familiar with the medium have recognized that American comics, since becoming a mass-cultural product in 1939, have matured beyond their humble beginnings as a monthly publication for children. However, historians are not yet in agreement as to when the medium became mature. This thesis proposes that the medium's maturity was cemented between 1985 and 2000, a much later point in time than existing texts postulate. The project involves the analysis of how an American mass medium, in this case the comic book, matured in the last two decades of the twentieth century. The goal is to show the interconnected relationships and factors that facilitated the maturation of the American sequential art, specifically a focus on a group of British writers working at DC Comics and Vertigo, an alternative imprint under the financial control of DC.

The project consulted the major works of British comic scriptwriters, Alan Moore, Jamie Delano, Grant Morrison, Peter Milligan, Neil Gaiman, Warren Ellis, and Garth Ennis. These works include *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, *Shade: the Changing Man*, *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, *Animal Man*, *Sandman*, *Transmetropolitan*, *Preacher* and several other important works. Following a chronological organization, the work tracks major changes taking place in the American comic book industry in the commercial, corporate, and creative sectors to show the processes through which the medium matured in this time period. This is accomplished by combining textual analysis of the comics with industry specific records and a focus on major cultural shifts in US society and culture.

To those I have been fortunate enough to call family and friend,
both living and departed,
in gratitude and love.

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Due to their collectability, rarity, and cost (not to mention the sheer volume I consulted during the many months of writing this), acquiring access to several decades worth of American comic books without the aid of libraries and collectors was otherwise impossible. It is with much gratitude that I thank the Library of Congress' Megan Halsband who not only allowed me access to over seventy years of comics but also actively recommended various titles relevant to my research. She spent several days transporting comic books back and forth from a vault to my small table. Similarly, the staff at Ohio State University's Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum allowed me access to their vast collection of materials, which without their aid would have been discouragingly difficult to navigate. I would also like to thank the fine staff at the University of Vermont's Bailey Howe Library who has been fantastic in providing and obtaining research materials not only for this thesis but also for the duration of my enrolment at UVM. Last but not least, I want to acknowledge Amy Alexander, a private collector in Baltimore, who opened up her entire collection of comics (as well as her home) to me for an entire week to sift through hundreds of issues at her kitchen table for six hours a day.

My indebtedness extends well beyond the hallowed halls of libraries. Abigail McGowan, my advisor, has been invaluable in the completion of this work. She kept me on task, tirelessly and thoroughly proofed and commented on the narrative, asked difficult but pertinent questions, and provided (much needed) encouragement throughout the entire process. Much thanks also goes to Melanie Gustafson who has provided substantial feedback over the course of the composition of the work and even spent part of her winter vacation reading an *extremely* rough draft. Without their aid and it is very unlikely that this would have been completed. Finally, I would like to thank many of my fellow grad students who have helped not only in discussing the ideas contained within and proofreading but also for the catharsis of commiseration and demands that I put down the books and leave my apartment on occasion.

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Introduction

I, like many of the authors discussed in this text, I grew up reading superhero comics and abandoning them at adolescence. When I was twelve (or maybe thirteen) I boxed up hundreds of comics and left them to collect dust in my father's basement, safely out of sight from the prying judgmental eyes of teenage social circles. They sat more or less undisturbed until I finally sold them to cover the cost of a weekend trip to Philadelphia and my first official tattoo. Over the years I found myself drawn back to the medium by the adamant insistence of friends that I read this or that. *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, *Transmetropolitan*, *Sandman*, *Y the Last Man*, *DMZ*, *From Hell*, *A History of Violence*, *Road to Perdition*, and a host of other comics were loaned or outright purchased for my consumption. I complied and found that these were smart, funny, frightening, nuanced, subversive, philosophical, and, like any good art, disarmingly provocative—hardly the comics I had consumed as a child.

In giving up comics at adolescence I had unknowingly removed myself from a profound moment in the medium's history. The trite storylines of hyper moral lantern-jawed superheroes and one-dimensional anti-heroes so prominent in the comics of my youth had given way to a host of emotionally complex characters, many of which were not superheroes in the traditional sense. The simplistic, yet oddly convoluted, storylines wherein heroes took on villains in an effort to foil a nefarious plot had fallen to the wayside; replaced instead by plots that focused on the intricate relationships that inform human society and culture. They were full of sexuality, violence, dark humor, and political irreverence. In the few years that marked my hiatus from comics I was left

wondering ‘Why had the medium changed so dramatically in such a short a time?’ ‘Who was involved?’ ‘How were these comics different from those I had consumed as a child?’ ‘What, exactly is a mature comic?’ It took years before these questions moved beyond mental exercises and loosely structured conversations with the employees of my local comic retailer in Baltimore, and the last question, ‘what is a mature comic’, only took shape as I began the research you are currently holding.

The question of what exactly does ‘maturity’ mean in this case is valid but somewhat enigmatic. A plot’s inclusion of violence, gore, sex, and/or foul language is enough to garner almost any mass-culture medium an official or unofficial designation of ‘mature’, and to be sure many of the titles examined herein do contain all four criteria. Yet if sex, language, violence, or gore were the sole parameters of mature entertainment then *Tom and Jerry* and the *Roadrunner* cartoons, the *Scream 4* and *Point Break* films, the *Twilight Saga* and *Fifty Shades of Gray* novels would be considered mature representations of their respective mediums. This is not meant to denigrate such works, merely to note that they are not generally recognized as particularly complex, although their mediums—cartoons, film, and fiction—are all mass consumer products.

The concept of maturity then, extends beyond such superficial trappings. In comics, as in other artistic mediums, maturity can be boiled down into one word—complexity. Of course this simplification has its own drawbacks; complexity of what, exactly? The issue of complexity can extend to several areas; the complexity of the narrative, the complexity of the work’s characters, the complexity of the artwork, or the complexity of the physical presentation of the product itself. However, few comics are wholly complex. For example, the art of Eric Drooker’s *Flood!* or Art Spiegelman’s

Maus is, in a purely technical sense, simplistic. Yet the stories to which such art is attached are touching and multifaceted and the seemingly simplistic artwork actually *adds* to the complexity of the whole. Yet such complexity has to work within a medium designed to be mass-produced and mass consumed.

Maturity in comic books is not an exclusionary term, complexity can be found in any of its disparate elements. Anthropomorphic animals, often associated with children's cartoons can and have had a profound emotional impact in comic books, one need look no further than the previously mentioned *Maus*. Similarly, the comic book genre most associated with children is that of the spandex clad superhero. The association is not undeserved; there are more than enough examples to illustrate such a point, however, dismissal based solely on the wearing of spandex, masks, or capes would be to discount what is considered by many to be the best mainstream comic ever published, *Watchmen*. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* has an immensely elaborate narrative, a host of complex characters, a nuanced world (our own), ornate artwork, and a radically intricate presentation. The work is so complex that English professor and comic scholar Walter Hudsick does not think it should be the first comic a newcomer to the medium should read. It would be like William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* being someone's first novel or Tchaikovsky's *Symphony # 6* being someone's first piece of music—while the emotionality intended by the creators may seep through, for the uninitiated they come across as discordant, difficult, and potentially pretentious.¹

However, it was the other questions, and many others, that prompted my research into how comic books challenged the longstanding opinion that the medium was merely a

¹ Walter Hudsick, "Reassembling the Components in the Correct Sequence: Why You Shouldn't Read *Watchmen* First," in *Minutes to Midnight: Twelve Essays on "Watchmen"*, Kindle (Edwardsville, IL: Sequart Research and Literacy Organization, 2012), loc. 148.

“negligible by-product of mass culture or a heap of lowbrow publications good for thick-headed adolescent” males.² From small underground publishers to gigantic corporate entities, the creative work of artists and writers, technological innovations, retail dynamics, and publishing practices, there are many avenues and aspects to the maturation of American comics. However, this work takes a narrow approach and specifically examines the role of DC Comics, their alternative imprint Vertigo, and a handful of British writers in the maturation of American comics. This focus naturally situates the historical examination primarily within the context of the mainstream comic book industry and, to a lesser extent, the ambiguous classification of ‘alternative comics’ and in opposition to much of the existing historiography on the maturation of the medium.

The over arching historical narrative of American comic books in the scholarly literature is by and large in agreement, with a notable and glaring exception of the point in time wherein the medium became a mature, complex, and artistic representation of the culture in which it was created. Historians have placed such a maturation of the medium in various eras within the history of comic books, little surprise considering that the academic consideration of comic books is a relatively new phenomenon, particularly for the historical discipline. The first prolific historical monograph on the subject, Thomas Inge’s *The American Comic Book*, was not printed until 1985. Despite the scholarship’s admittedly late arrival to academia, cultural historian Edwin T. Arnold noted that it was Inge’s scholarship that had “helped to draw serious attention to an under-appreciated art form” and created something of an awakening to the idea that comic books could be a

² Annalisa Di Liddo, *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 14..

viable scholarly resource.³ Inge's follow up to *The American Comic Book* was *Comics as Culture*, a collection of the scholarly essays published in 1990. Here Inge posits the maturation of comic books as having taken place during the underground comics boom of the 1960s. A conclusion shared by historian Paul Lopes in his monograph *Demanding Respect: the Evolution of the American Comic Book*. Both historians posit that the 1960s, with its large counter culture and popular notions of free love and radical liberal politics led to mature political content in underground and independent comic books. Matthew J. Costello's *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America* also posits the medium's maturation during the 1960s and gives Marvel Comics' superhero publications of the 1960s precedent in the medium's maturation by putting forward the theory that it was superheroes addressing Cold War fears that cemented mature themes as part the content of comics.

Jean-Paul Gabilliet's lengthy and superiorly researched *Of Comics and Men: a Cultural History of American Comic Books* and David Hajdu's *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How it Changed America* largely, but not categorically, places the medium's maturity as having taken place in the 1950s, rather early in the comic book's rise in American mass-culture. Gabilliet and Hajdu claim that Bill Gaines (owner and editor) and the working class war veterans of writing and drawing for *Entertaining Comics* after WWII as the rightful heirs of having made comic books a mature medium. Gaines and the EC staff were, by the standards of the time, highly contemptuous of Cold War conservatism and regularly featured scathing critiques of American suburbanism, militarism, expansionism, racism, and imperialism—pushing the

³ Edwin T. Arnold, "Comics as Culture by M. Thomas Inge," *Appalachian Journal* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1991): 229.

socially accepted envelope in a medium viewed as purely for children. Thus, Gabilliet and Hadju situate EC Comics' Cold War socio-political irreverence as the point of comics' maturation.

Still, other historians have concluded that comics became a mature medium through the works of ex-underground comic creators in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This theory, best articulated by Joseph Witek in *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar*, maintains that these works were critically acclaimed, aimed at adult audiences, and exceptional examples of literary and artistic craftsmanship. These independent American creators supplied readers with a radically different form of the medium—moving, complex, and socially engaged. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* by Bradford W. Wright also posits the maturation of comics in the early 1980s, but claims that it was less based on content than the popularity of the medium amongst an aging readership—children who grew up reading comics continued to do so as adults, thus forcing publishers to create comics more palatable to older readers.

All of the above works make compelling historical arguments, however, fail to take into appropriate account the prolific changes within the comic industry beginning in the mid-1980s and lasting well into the 1990s. Previous decades lacked the complexity of narrative and form, as were the cases of EC Comics as well as the 1960s superhero and underground comics. Conversely, comic books that did display the complexity of narrative and form being produced in the early 1980s lacked access to the large readership and distribution required by a mass medium. This thesis, situated primarily (though not exclusively) between 1986 and 2001, argues that these fifteen years represent

not just a sea change in American comic books but the moment in which the medium became complex and nuanced enough to be considered ‘mature’. This was the result of a changing comic book retail/distribution landscape beginning in the mid-1980s, as well as financial and creative booms and busts, changing relationships between creators and publishers, and production factors combined. Furthermore, I argue that it was DC Comics and its imprint, Vertigo, along with a handful of British writers that led to this unique and singular moment of maturity in the medium’s history.

Although this work argues for a much later maturation than other historians, their lengthy and penetrating analysis was invaluable in building a concise but compelling historical context. The first chapter uses this context to argue that the social backlash of the 1950s, non-mass cultural status of underground comics of the 1960s, and limited readership of alternative ‘graphic novels’ of the 1970s were important for two reasons. On one hand, it showed that comics could be subversive, complex, and moving. On the other hand, however, these same factors led to social backlash, limited cultural appeal, and small readerships all of which prolonged the maturation of mainstream comic books. The second portion of this chapter argues that the paradigm shift with which this thesis is concerned began in the late 1970s at DC Comics with the hiring of Jenette Kahn and her untried editorial vision for the mainstream comic publisher.

Following the framework built in the first chapter the subsequent section looks at the major DC Comics books of two authors, Frank Miller and Alan Moore. Specifically Miller’s *Batman: the Dark Knight Returns* in addition to *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta* by Moore. I argue that the work of these two authors, along with the aid of DC Comics’ new editorial vision, helped mature the medium by introducing new and challenging

stories that catered to an adult readership by introducing political and socio-cultural critiques of America through intricate and skillful use of the medium's text/picture format (meta-narratives, revisionism, text heavy passages, et cetera). The entrance of Alan Moore into the pantheon of comic scriptwriters also marked, at least in the case of DC, an increased reliance on British writers for the company's mature titles.

DC Comics' dependence on British writers for mature titles is the primary subject of the third chapter, which focuses on a handful of Brits and their published work under the DC logo in the late 1980s. Analyzed therein are three pivotal historical changes leading to the continued maturation of the medium, though admittedly in different contexts. Here it is argued that British writers coming to work for DC brought with them a distinctly different notion of the medium and what it could (or should) be, and that this was deeply tethered to their nationality, literary tradition, and working-class backgrounds. Second, the newly arrived writers negotiated more amicable working conditions including higher wages, profit/royalty sharing, and more creative latitude than previous mainstream creators, all of which prompted the writers to craft original and nuanced, but ultimately mass-marketable, scripts. Thirdly, the British creators crafted scripts that, while certainly in line with many mainstream conventions, directly and poignantly addressed contemporary social issues that philosophically engaged readers in ways mainstream comics had never before achieved.

The fourth and final chapter examines the creation of the Vertigo imprint to house and differentiate the works written by the British artists, giving the mature mainstream titles their own distinct voice within the larger comic marketplace. It also introduces Karen Berger, a key actor in fostering DC's mature titles and her role in the creation of

the Vertigo imprint. Vertigo's creation coincided with a massive financial upswing in the comic book market with historical contingency playing a defining role in the imprint's initial success in a crowded consumer arena. However, just as the market had peaked in 1993, it also started to fall that same year. The causality of the market crash was a near industry-wide perfect storm of mediocre work, rampant speculation, publisher malaise, and distribution issues. I contend that although Vertigo began on solid financial footing, in a devitalized market the imprint's continued success was anything but guaranteed. Only through the strength of its publications, in this case the addition of *Preacher* and *Transmetropolitan* to its stable of monthly titles, did Vertigo survive and thrive in a hostile market.

To best understand the changing landscape of American comic books in this thesis it is important to provide a brief overview of two key themes playing out in US and British culture during the fifteen-year span of time with which this work is primarily concerned. First, there is the political and social conservatism of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations of the 1980s. Second, was the development of what pop culture critic Ryan Gilbey dubbed the 'Doom Generation', a social backlash against socio-political tradition and conservatism.⁴ It is the conservative socio-political culture of the 1980s that provided the more intricate and irreverent plot devices in DC and Vertigo's British scripted comics. The use of mainstream comic publications to vehemently critique ultra-conservatism predated, at least for British comic creators, 1986. First published in 1981 Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta*, examined more in depth in chapter two, was very much in opposition to conservatism in general and the administration of Margaret Thatcher in

⁴ Gilbey borrowed the term from the title of Gregg Araki's *The Doom Generation*, a film known for its disjointed and surreal narrative, shocking imagery, visual/aural overstimulation, and a brutal closing scene.

particular. Conversely, Frank Miller's version of Batman, also discussed further in chapter two, supported a traditional conservative role of comic book heroes as police vigilantes. Understanding the natures of conservatism and the Doom Generation in the 1980s and 90s is, at least in part, imperative to making sense of the maturation of comics in this context.

The conservative era of the 1980s in both the US and UK were marked by five motifs, all of which were addressed by DC and Vertigo's British creators in their tenures with the corporation—orthodox fiscal conservatism, government scandals, Cold War foreign policy, religious fundamentalism, and right winged social ideologies.⁵ Conservatism during the 1980s was presented to voters not as an extension of a long held societal tradition and adherence to conservative values but as a reaffirmation of America as having always been a conservative country. The conservative parties celebrated these propagandized histories as a consensus of conservatism and “minimized the level of conflict in American life past and present, celebrated the relative "consensus," and tended to attribute [socio-cultural] conflict as” a psychological deficiency “of dubious merit rather than rational economic interests.”⁶ These of course have been linked to Anglo-American conservatives' ideological “fear of the state, the elevation of individual liberty above all other values, [and] the insistence that personal freedom is inseparable from economic freedom.”⁷

⁵ Ted Dickson, “Comparative Decades: Conservatism in the 1920s and 1980s,” *Organization of American Historians Magazine of History* 17, no. 2 (January 2003): 37.

⁶ Leo P. Ribuffo, “The Discovery and Rediscovery of American Conservatism Broadly Conceived,” *Organization of American Historians Magazine of History* 17, no. 2, Conservatism (January 2003): 6.

⁷ Alan Brinkley, “The Problem of American Conservatism,” *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (April 1994): 417; Martin Pugh, “Popular Conservatism in Britain: Continuity and Change, 1880-1987,” *Journal of British Studies* 27, no. 3, The Dilemmas of Democratic Politics (July 1988): 254.

In both the United States and the United Kingdom conservative voters were at the highest they had been in two decades. In the US voters identifying themselves as conservatives had reached 49% by 1984, an increase of over fourteen percent from 1980.⁸ British conservative voters comprised a smaller percentage of poll-goers, 43.2% in 1987, but remained a more steady demographic in the British electorate, up less than a percentage point from 1984.⁹ These large conservative demographics were deeply rooted in class distinctions. In his study, “Underway and Here to Stay: Party Realignment in the 1980s,” Helmut Norpoth concluded that those making over \$35,000 (\$73,500 if adjusted for inflation) a year were far more likely to vote for Reagan.¹⁰ Martin Pugh’s “Popular Conservatism in Britain: Continuity and Change, 1880-1987” comes to a similar conclusion—British conservatism was by and large supported by the society’s more affluent members.¹¹ Despite the high percentage of conservative voters in the United States and United Kingdom, there existed an extreme distrust of the conservative governments amongst large swaths of the domestic populations. Young working-class liberal members of Generation X, a demographic from which all of this thesis’ comic creators hailed, largely viewed the conservative parties as corrupt, disingenuous, dangerous, and un-empathetic.¹²

⁸ Helmut Norpoth, “Underway and Here to Stay: Party Realignment in the 1980s?,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (Autumn 1987): 383.

⁹ Pugh, “Popular Conservatism in Britain: Continuity and Change, 1880-1987,” 225. In the last half of the twentieth century British conservative voters dropped below forty percent in only one year, 1974. Comparatively, American conservatism, as a measure of voters, was far more fluid. In the second half of the twentieth century American conservative voters fluctuated between 29 and 49%.

¹⁰ Norpoth, “Underway and Here to Stay,” 383.

¹¹ Pugh, “Popular Conservatism in Britain: Continuity and Change, 1880-1987,” 271. Though the links between conservatism and affluence, and thus liberalism and lower income, tend to hold true, Pugh notes that working-class populations who lived in close proximity to middle and upper class constituencies tended to vote along conservative lines.

¹² Steven F. Messner, Eric P. Baumer, and Richard Rosenfeld, “Distrust of Government, the Vigilante Tradition, and Support for Capital Punishment,” *Law & Society Review* 40, no. 3 (September 2006): 571.

The last generation of Gen Xers, gloomily dubbed ‘Doom Generation’, were marked by a turn to images of gothic distress and horror in music, fashion, and entertainment—a generation seeking answers, “a generation feeling disenfranchised from the old ideologies or beliefs or 'traditional politics' whose relevance has withered as the decade has worn on.”¹³ Historian Mike Grimshaw expands on Gilbey’s definition, further positing the Doom Generation as “a mélange of tradition, pop culture, [and] gnostic occultism” who existed in a world both parallel and beyond in relation to “their baby boomer parents: a world of a multiple narrative of re-enchantment expressing an eclectic, largely anti-establishment attitude, one highly suspicious of religious orthodoxy yet receptive to the fantastical, the occult, and the gnostic.”¹⁴ However, the Doom Generation was, according to historian Kylo-Patrick Hart, also an extension of the punk and postpunk eras, both of which (though more so the former) are characterized by their challenging of “hegemonic conceptions of ideology and social order, producing a potentially powerful form of resistance to dominant social groups and establishments, as well as to repressive social expectations and gender roles.”¹⁵ Adopting the punk/postpunk potential for radicalism and subversion and amalgamating it with “the cultural practices of bricolage, mainstream incorporation of avant-garde phenomena, and postmodern narrative approaches,”¹⁶ the Doom Generation acted as a brief but vibrant cultural

¹³ Ryan Gilbey, “Doom Generation: New Tales from the Dark Side,” *The Face*, 1997, 122.

¹⁴ Mike Grimshaw, “On Preacher (Or, the Death of God in Pictures),” in *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, ed. A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2010), 149.

¹⁵ Kylo-Patrick R. Hart, “Auteur/Bricoleur/Provocateur: Gregg Araki and Postpunk Style in The Doom Generation,” *Journal of Film and Video* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 30–31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

counterbalance to the conservatism of Reagan and Thatcher, and was well represented within the mature comic books written by the Brits.¹⁷

Although conservative politics and the Doom Generation's rejection of tradition and traditional ideology were similarly characterized in US and British society, creative production of comics shared no such similarity. British writers coming into the American comic book market brought with them several unfamiliar aspects to mainstream American comics that made them easily distinguishable from most of their domestically drafted counterparts. By 1985 the majority of American men who populated mainstream publishers' script departments were, in many ways, regurgitating plots, tropes, archetypes, and characters from the medium's four decade old back catalog. British writers, however, brought different literary influences borrowed from underground comics, British comic book traditions, and (by their own admission) appropriated heavily from authors such as James Joyce and William S. Burroughs.

Conservatism, anti-conservatism, a broader range of literary influences, and a more elaborate use of the comic book form were the core causes of the medium's revisionist moment. Briefly defined, literary revisionism is the process of retelling a story or genre in an effort to "discover an original relation to truth and thus to open the tradition and its texts" to new experiences by a "re-seeing, leading to a re-valuing,

¹⁷ Recent scholarship has produced an astounding amount of excellent scholarship regarding the social and political conservatism of the 1980s as well as Generation X's counter culture. Michael Schaller and George Rising's *The Republican Ascendancy: American Politics 1968-2001* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2002), Dan Carter's *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counter-Revolution, 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996) stand as exemplary examples of historical research into American conservatism. In regards to Generation X's counter-cultural moment, Tom Beaudoin's *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998) and Eric Davis's *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic + Mysticism in the Age of Information* (New York: Three River Press, 1998) stand as two of the most erudite works on the subject.

leading to a re-aiming.”¹⁸ Indeed, the revisionists of American comics re-saw, re-valued, and re-aimed the medium by engaging in a complexity of form and content that was often manifested through extreme violence, overt sexuality, elaborate philosophies, and dialogue reflecting working class vernacular—all of which had been nonexistent or extremely limited in mainstream comics. This revisionist moment is, particularly for the maturation of comics, an important one that has remained a part of the industry’s mainstream publications since the mid-1980s. It is also important to note, however, that the radicalism of revisionism is tempered by the fact that any fictional revisionism, particularly that of comic books, “is grounded in an intensely conservative attempt to defend the [comic book] tradition from the consequences of its shortcomings.”¹⁹ Thus the continued adherence to superheroes in even the most revisionist mainstream comics of the time.

Less prominent but no less important, the issue of gender sits quite visibly at the margins of this research. Although my research focuses on an influx of British talent, it was at the insistence of women in positions of power within DC Comic’s corporate structure that UK writers flourished in the US market and were thus able to impact the medium in such a profound way. It was during this period that women became involved in every aspect of comics (from production to consumption) in demographics and numbers that had been unimagined at the beginning of the 1980s, or any other time period for that matter. Women as consumers had always waxed and waned; adolescent girls were a major consumer constituency in the late 1940s and early 1950s; in the mid to late 1960s adult women were a major contingent of underground comic consumers and

¹⁸ Jean Pierre Mileur, *Literary Revisionism and the Burden of Modernity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

became so entrenched in the underground comics scene that they came to be their own publishers, using the medium to actively promote LBGT and feminist agendas, as well as combat racism and misogyny.

Each spike in readership was followed by a comparable nosedive; as such women remained an inconstant presence within the medium. Although unintentional, the hiring of Jenette Kahn at DC Comics in the mid-1970s set a precedent of the inclusion of women in the production side of the medium, specifically at DC and its imprints. Which led to the employment of Karen Berger who actively sought and employed women in creative positions at Vertigo during the 1990s. That gender is so prominent despite its secondary placement within this research is evidence of its importance and supports the need for a gender-focused examination of American comics and the critical role of women in the maturation of the medium, which this work unfortunately offers only a cursory overview.

Chapter 1

The furor over comics waxes, but never wanes. Parents worry; psychologists predict dire consequences; and my children and yours go right on reading comics, with or without parental sanction...¹

- Katherine Clifford

- Though comic studies has only recently emerged as an area of study for a variety of academic disciplines, generating more than a little controversy as it jockeyed for recognition in the scholarly community, the historical narrative of American comic books is hardly nascent. The American comic book has been present as a consumer product since the mid-nineteenth century and, since 1939, a predominant pop culture publication for nearly three-quarters of a century. The American comic's pop culture status is intimately related with the rise of the superhero genre—a genre characterized by wildly fantastical elements and a tenuous relationship to reality.²

- Undoubtedly many historical examples could illustrate such a purposeful detachment from reality as a sanctioning of pure entertainment value. However, since the medium's rise to mass-culture status writers and artists have attempted, with varying degrees of success and social outcry, to use the medium and its specific genres as a means to “recombine and invert the real” and show that comic books can exist “in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real.”³ The following chapter examines, albeit briefly, key historical moments prior to 1986 wherein comic books attempted to subvert

¹ Katherine Clifford, “Common Sense About Comics,” *Parents Magazine*, October 1948, 30.

² Julia Round, “Fantastic Alterities and The Sandman,” in *Crossing Boundaries in Graphic Narrative: Essays of Forms, Series and Genres*, ed. Jake Jakaitis and James F. Wurtz (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 73-74; Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 41.

³ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methune, 1981), 20; Round, “Fantastic Alterities and The Sandman,” 73.

social norms as well as the impassioned anti-comic movements caused by such endeavors.

Left in the Gutter: A Brief History of American Comics

The gutter mentioned in the title of this section has dual meanings. On the one hand, it is representative of the more literal meaning, designed to conjure images of refuse washed away and hidden in subterranean sewers in this case, important causal facts omitted for the sake of scholarly expediency. On the other hand, however, it also references the specialized meaning of the word ‘gutter’ specific to comic books. The gutter, as it pertains to the latter, is the small, seemingly empty, space separating one panel from another. However, the gutter is anything but empty; it is the representation of time and action, taking two distinct pictures—each set in a specific time and depicting a single action—and forcing the reader to connect two images into a single idea.⁴ This connection of time and action is cumulative, each panel building upon the one preceding it exponentially, a process not unfamiliar to historians.

While this thesis aims to historically contextualize the maturation of comic books in the United States during the last two decades of the twentieth century, more specifically how British comic creators played a crucial role in the process; it cannot encompass the entirety of comic book history. Academic writing, however, has no equivalent to the gutter and thus the relationships between time and action have to be written out methodically, thoroughly analyzed, and articulated with carefully chosen words and punctuation. The following portion is meant to serve as a gutter of sorts, a

⁴ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, 4th ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 65–67.

means to show the passage of time and action that, while beyond the scope of this paper, is nonetheless vital to its understanding.

The relationship between comic books and society has always been contentious. The first comic book appeared in North America in 1839, an import of Swiss author Rodolphe Töpffer's *Les Aventures de Monsieur Vieux-Bois* which, when translated to English, was titled *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck*.⁵ The first comic books were viewed, much like their penny dreadful cousins, with derision. The combination of pictures and text prompted romantic poet William Wordsworth to denounce the emergent medium in a short 1846 sonnet titled "Illustrated Books and Newspapers," which read,

Discourse was deemed Man's noblest attribute,
And written words the glory of his hand;
Then followed Printing with enlarged command
For thought – dominion vast and absolute
For spreading truth, and making love expand.
Now prose and verse sunk into disrepute
Must lacquey [*sic*] a dumb Art that best can suit
The taste of this once-intellectual Land.
A backward movement surely have we here.
From manhood, – back to childhood: for the age –
Avaunt [*sic*] this vile abuse of pictured page!
Must eyes be all in all, the tongue and ear
Nothing? Heaven keep us from a lower stage.⁶

Wordsworth's derision was not uncommon, however, technological limitations of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century kept comic books and other illustrated periodical publications from becoming mass cultural mediums.⁷

Following in the footsteps of popular American pulp novels, the mass production and subsequent mass marketability of comic books began in the late 1930s. Unlike their

⁵ Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: a Cultural History of American Comic Books*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 3.

⁶ William Wordsworth, *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth in Ten Volumes*, vol. IX (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 246.

⁷ Vicki Anderson, *The Dime Novel in Children's Literature* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005), 54–55.

pulp progenitors, which were judged to be working class distractions, comic books were viewed by comic publishers as well as the general US population as a medium solely consumed by juveniles.⁸ The first decade of mass comic book production produced what has become the medium's most recognizable genre, and one inextricably linked to youth consumers: that of the superhero. Superman, created in 1939 was soon followed by other early American superheroes like Batman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America, all of whom fought off the Axis threats of WWII. According to comic book scholar Stephen Weiner, early superhero comics were often nothing more than "predictable, crude and enthusiastic propaganda," the craftsmanship of which was often mediocre.⁹ With the close of WWII the popularity of superhero comics waned, allowing publishers to experiment with different genres.

One such publisher was Entertaining Comics (EC), owned and primarily staffed by working class Jewish war veterans. During the industry's genre expansion EC Comics published western, science fiction, and pirate comics, however, the company became simultaneously notorious and trendy for its horror and crime-suspense publications, namely *The Haunt of Fear*, *Tales from the Crypt*, and *Shock and Crime Suspense Stories* titles. EC's horror and crime titles represented a radical departure for the textual and illustrated elements of mainstream comics. Al Feldstein, a writer employed with EC comics through the 1950s, insisted that those working at EC "always wrote to [their own] level. If we thought the comics were being read by very young children, we were not

⁸ Gary Groth, "Comics' Place in Pop Culture" (Talk presented at the Panel on Comic Art for the College Art Association, Seattle, WA, February 5, 1993), 7.

⁹ Stephen Weiner and Will Eisner, *Faster than a Speeding Bullet: the Rise of the Graphic Novel* (New York: NBM, 2003), 2.

particularly concerned with writing to their [children's] level.”¹⁰ Uncharacteristically violent and socio-politically subversive, EC's publications were hardly meant for youth consumers. And yet, the company's periodicals became an epicenter for the public debate about whether the medium was appropriate for children consumers. Some critics like Katherine Clifford, a writer for *Parents Magazine*, supported EC's promotion of racial tolerance, while others, like *New York Times* columnist Dorothy Barclay and author Robert Warshow, urged concerned parents to regulate their children's reading habits.¹¹ However, few critics of the medium were more vehemently opposed to and outspoken against the medium than psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, who stated that comic books were “contributing factors to many children's maladjustment.”¹²

Wertham and his socially conservative acolytes eventually overpowered moderate voices like those of Clifford, Barclay, and Warshow, prompting Senate hearings on the matter in 1954. Focused on the role of comic books in contributing to youth misconduct, the televised hearings of the Senate subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency publicly debated the medium's placement in society. William Gaines, owner of EC Comics, testified that comics were less violent and realistic than the information printed in newspapers and, in many ways, apt reflections of the society in which they are created. In essence, the horror comics published by EC and their competitors were not products created in a cultural vacuum but reflections of the violence and horror found in US society. And although many comic book publishers testified at the hearings, Gaines gave the only testimony defending the medium on artistic grounds, telling the senate

¹⁰ Al Williamson et al., *Squa Tront #8*, vol. 1 (New York: Entertaining Comics, 1978), 23.

¹¹ Clifford, “Common Sense About Comics,” 30; Dorothy Barclay, “Comic Books and Television,” *New York Times*, March 5, 1950; Robert Warshow, “Paul, the Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham,” *Commentary* 17 (June 1954): 69–70.

¹² Frederick Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Reinhart, 1954), 10.

committee, “[w]e don't think that the crime news or any news should be banned because it is bad for children. Once you start to censor you must censor everything. You must censor comic books, radio, television, and newspapers. Then you must censor what people may say. Then you will have turned this country into Spain or Russia.”¹³ Gaines’ Cold War styled condemnation, however, did not stop the censorship of comics.

The end result of the hearings was the *Comic Book Code of 1954*, which was adopted industry wide. The code prohibited the portrayal of sympathetic criminals, “disrespect for established authority,” excessive knife or gun usage, and scenes of violence. Furthermore, the code actively sought to regulate morality by disallowing the illustration of “suggestive posture” or any other elements that would “stimulate the lower and baser emotions,” foster “respect for parents, the moral code, and honorable behavior,” as well as dictated that all romance stories “emphasize[d] the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage.” And finally, the words ‘horror’ and ‘crime’ were banished from the covers of all comic books.¹⁴ The *Comic Book Code of 1954* appeared to be custom-built to cripple EC Comics, which had, through its various publications, risen to fame by pushing the social boundaries banned by the new comics code. What little forward movement in the medium that had been achieved by 1954 was undone with the institution of the comics code, a document designed to purposefully limit the creative freedom of comic writers and artists.¹⁵ EC was financially crippled and, with the

¹³ Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency*, Interim Report (Washington DC: United States Senate, 1955), 101.

¹⁴ Comics Magazine Association of America, “The Comic Book Code of 1954” (Comics Magazine Association of America, Inc., October 26, 1954).

¹⁵ Matthew J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 55.

exception of *MAD Magazine*, slowly pulled its other titles from circulation until it left the industry altogether in 1955.¹⁶

Although comics' first clash with society resulted in the censorial *Comics Book Code*, it did not lead to a financial crippling of the industry only the creative development of the medium.¹⁷ The lack of creativity in mainstream comics lasted well into the 1960s and resulted in short-lived ineffectual attempts at using the medium to address the same issues that had made EC a target of social conservatives in the 1950s—war, racism, poverty, alcoholism, anti-Semitism, violence, and crime.¹⁸ Hamstrung by the *Comic Book Code of 1954*, a document that remained unchanged until 1971, writers and artists had difficulty addressing American society and with any poignancy or lasting effect. The inability to address social and cultural issues was compounded by the reemergence of the superhero genre in American comics and the continued perception that comics were “an exclusively children’s mass medium.”¹⁹

In an inverse of the social backlash toward the medium in the mid-1950s, some comic creators of the 1960s articulated their displeasure with the mainstream industry by producing and distributing underground comics, commonly referred to as comix. Comix were the counterculture’s reaction to and the antithesis of mainstream comics. Generally regarded as the first underground comic, *God Nose* was written by Jack Jackson under the pseudonym ‘Jaxson’ and published in 1964.²⁰ The comix movement birthed many notable creators and titles such as Frank Stack’s (pen name Foolbert Sturgeon) *The*

¹⁶ Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 117. DC Comics (then Detective Comics) purchased the publishing rights to *MAD Magazine* in 1955 and have published it ever since.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xi–xii.

¹⁸ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 177.

¹⁹ Groth, “Comics’ Place in Pop Culture,” 8.

²⁰ Jaxon, “Introduction,” in *God Nose*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Rip Off Press, 1971), 2.

Adventures of Jesus, Gilbert Shelton's *Feds 'n' Heads*, R. Crumb's *Fritz the Cat* and *Book of Genesis*, as well as Manuel 'Spain' Rodriguez's *Trashman*, *Zodiac Mindwarp*, and *Mean Bitch Thrills*. However, comix's most notable contribution to the medium was its complete and purposeful rejection of the comics code. Gary Groth, a critic, publisher, journalist, and scholar of comics, viewed comix as a "medium devoted to sex, drugs, and radical politics... an explosive reaction against the insipidity of everything comics had come to symbolize."²¹ While sex, drugs, and radical politics certainly characterized many of the more popular comix, the underground movement also fostered the rise of minority, LGBT, and women's voices in the comic industry, all of whom responded to the misogyny, homophobia, sexism, and physical abuse found in the works of R. Crumb and several other men working in comix.²² Comix also offered something quite different than their mainstream counterparts. According to Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly, both of whom were figureheads in the underground comics scene and the latter of which is currently the art editor for *The New Yorker*, "underground comics had offered something new: comics by adults, for adults; comics that weren't under any obligation be funny, or escapist pulp; comics unselfconsciously redefining what comics could be, by smashing formal and stylistic, as well as cultural and political, taboos."²³ This description reflected the breadth of America's counterculture.

The magazine *Fortune* described comix's readers,

as multileveled and varied as American society itself. Its members have neither blueprint nor party line, neither national office nor secretariat. There is no unanimity among them about appropriate tactics or even

²¹ Groth, "Comics' Place in Pop Culture," 8.

²² Paul Douglas Lopes, *Demanding Respect: the Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 81–84.

²³ Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly, "Raw Nerves," in *Read Yourself Raw*, ed. Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 1.

appropriate ends except in the most general way...[it] encompasses hippies and doctrinaire Leninists, anarchists and populists, the "campus cong" and peaceful communards, militant confrontationists and mystics, Bakuninists and humanists, power seekers, ego trippers, revolutionaries whose domain is the individual mind, Maoists, rock bands, and cultural guerrillas.²⁴

The relationship between comix, sexuality, and the counterculture of the 1960s drew the ire of the United States government. Echoing 1954, the government readily backed growing concerns over "a rising demand for obscenity" and began confiscating comix as well as arresting those responsible for their sale in publication.²⁵ The sale of comix also caused the US Supreme Court to redefine obscene material, setting a new precedent colloquially called the 'community standard' in *Miller v. California*. The ruling of *Miller v. California* stated that obscene material was not necessarily protected by the First Amendment and,

The basic guidelines for the trier of fact must be: (a) whether "the average person, applying contemporary community standards" would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest, (b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law, and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. If a state obscenity law is thus limited, [First Amendment](#) values are adequately protected by ultimate independent appellate review of constitutional claims when necessary.²⁶

As the counterculture waned under the conservative turn of US society, so too did underground comics. By 1974 the comix revolution had all but died out; "what had seemed a revolution simply deflated into a lifestyle. Underground comics were

²⁴ Charles Burck, "Student Activists: Free-form Revolutionaries," *Fortune*, January 1969, 108.

²⁵ Lopes, *Demanding Respect*, 85; Richard Gilman, "There's a Wave of Pornography, Obscenity, Sexual Expression," *New York Times*, September 8, 1968, SM36.

²⁶ *Miller v. California* (No. 70-73), U.S. Supreme Court Reports, 23–25 (United States Supreme Court 1973).

stereotyped as dealing only with Sex, Dope, and Cheap Thrills. They got stuffed into the back of the cultural closet, along with bong pipes and love beads...²⁷

In the vacuum of the mid-1970s comic book industry, independent comics – an intermediary between the underground and the mainstream, although kindred in spirit to the former – was born. Many of the post-1974 independent comic creators, specifically Jack Jackson, Harvey Pekar, and Art Spiegelman, hailed from the subversive comix tradition. However, as independent creators, according to literary theorist Joseph Witek, these authors combined “the artistic autonomy of the underground cartoonist with more intellectually focused concerns.”²⁸ These ‘intellectually focused concerns’ were manifested in various ways. Harvey Pekar, author of *American Splendor*, had cut his teeth in the medium under the tutelage of R. Crumb, who not only encouraged the young Pekar but also called the writing of *American Splendor*, “so staggeringly mundane as to border on the exotic!”²⁹ Pekar’s comic book work was publicly recognized when the author was awarded the American Book Award for *American Splendor* in 1987.³⁰

Like Pekar, Jack Jackson was a prominent member in the underground comics community, credited as the creator of the first comix publication (*God Nose*). In 1969, Jackson had also been a founding member, editor, and contributor of comix magazine *Rip Off Press*. Jackson’s *Comanche Moon* and *Los Tejanos*, however, took an entirely different approach to independent comic creation. Both titles were historically researched works and, in rare form for the medium, included full bibliographies in their back matter.

²⁷ Spiegelman and Mouly, “Raw Nerves,” 1.

²⁸ Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 5.

²⁹ Harvey Pekar, *American Splendor and More American Splendor: The Life and Times of Harvey Pekar*, 1st ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 5.

³⁰ Reed Johnson, “Harvey Pekar Dies at 70; Comic Book Author Known for ‘American Splendor’ Series,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 13, 2010.

Jackson's use of factual history in his comics was so highly regarded by the academic community that Jackson moved into scholarly research at the behest of the Texas State Historical Association (TSHA). Since writing for the TSHA Jackson has been awarded the Kate Brooks Bates Award, in 1987, 1996, 1999, and 2003, an award bestowed to scholars for producing "a significant piece of historical research dealing with any phase of Texas history prior to 1900."³¹

Writing and illustrating numerous titles during the 1960s and editing the monthly avant-garde comix magazine *Raw*, Art Spiegelman is perhaps the best-known independent comic creator to come from the underground comic institution, and for good reason.³² Spiegelman's magnum opus is *Maus: a Survivor's Tale*, a simultaneously allegorical and historical story about Spiegelman's tumultuous relationship with his father and his father's time spent in a Nazi concentration camp. *Maus* is a moving story and represented one of the very first instances of the medium not only transcending the stereotypes associated with both mainstream and underground comics but also coming to much wider public acceptance. In 1987 *Maus* was nominated for the biography of the year award by the National Book Critics Circle, awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, and added to the Young Adult Library Association's list of recommended books in 2005.³³ The book was awarded the Eisner Award for Best Graphic Album Reprint in 1992, and Spiegelman inducted into the Eisner Award's Hall of Fame in 1999.³⁴ Comparable in prestige to the Oscars in relation to film, the Eisner Awards represent a confirmation of

³¹ Texas State Historical Association, "Kate Brooks Bates Award for Historical Research," *Texas State Historical Association: A Digital Gateway to Texas History*, accessed August 19, 2012, <http://www.tshaonline.org>.

³² Witek, *Comic Books as History*, 58–59; 96.

³³ *Ibid.*, 96–97; Steven Barclay Agency, "Art Spiegelman," *Steven Barclay Agency: Lectures and Readings*, accessed August 17, 2012, <http://barclayagency.com/spiegelman.html>.

³⁴ San Diego Comic-Con, "1990s Eisner Award Recipients," *Comic-Con International*, accessed August 9, 2012, <http://comic-con.org/awards/1990s-recipients>.

achievement to comic creators by their peers. Spiegelman's *Maus* was such an influential work that Witek claimed "the unprecedented critical reception for *Maus* has changed, perhaps forever, the cultural perception of what a comic can be and what can be accomplished by creators who take seriously the sequential art medium."³⁵

The historical connections are not tenuous; there is a clear indication of a medium negotiating an often-contentious social space and like the gutters of comics they link one still-frame of comic history to the next. The narrative of American comic books is one of negotiation, expansion, and contraction between the medium and society, more specifically the contention between changing social mores and the artistic vision of comic creators. Creators, like those employed at EC, would push boundaries of what was socially acceptable in a mass medium only to face moral outrage from an American culture unready to accept the medium as anything but one produced for children. In response, creators avoided producing for a mass market and initiated an underground tradition that continues to inform the current state of the industry. History again repeated itself as comix pushed the parameters of what tolerable in *any* medium and comics once again faced the sanitizing effects of governmental legislation. As Spiegelman, Jackson, and Pekar, borrowing heavily from the renegade tradition of underground comics, were maturing the medium through their independent publications, another group of comic creators were working to legitimize the medium through mainstream venues. As underground comics were fading in popularity and salability, DC Comics too, was struggling with an overall downturn in the comic book market.

³⁵ Witek, *Comic Books as History*, 96–97.

Chapter 2

...DC Comics? That meant eighty titles a month, merchandise, television, movies. It was over my head. I had to say yes.¹

-Jenette Kahn

In 1976 the last vestiges of the underground comics movement had largely faded from the public eye, once again leaving mainstream publishers, for all intents and purposes, the sole voice of an entire medium. At the start of the year, DC's all-male editing staff, that it to say those responsible for channeling the energies of comic creators along with getting salable comics to print, were an aged group—forty-eight, sixty, and sixty-five—from an older generation of publishers.² Compared to their largest rival, Marvel, DC Comics had become a publisher whose comics were increasingly considered bland and unexciting. Conversely, Marvel had garnered a reputation for publishing comics with 'hip' characters and intense illustrations.

Beginning in the early 1960s Marvel rearranged their production techniques and fostered closer collaboration between the artists and writers called the 'Marvel method'. The result was a period of rapid creation wherein Marvel created some of the most popular superheroes of the medium. Under the editorial and artistic guidance of Stan Lee, Steve Ditko, Jack Kirby and others, Marvel created *Fantastic Four* (1961), *Incredible Hulk* (1962), *Spider-Man* (1963), *Avengers* (1963), *X-Men* (1963), *Daredevil* (1964), and a host of complimentary side characters and new villains with which the new superheroes interacted.³ Marvel's Silver Age heroes differed from those of DC—they were “vain,

¹ Jenette Kahn, A Chat with Kahn by Jennifer M. Contino, May 1, 2003.

² Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 260.

³ Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, *Fantastic Four #1*, vol. 1 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1961); Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, and Stan Lee, *The Incredible Hulk #1*, vol. 1 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1962); Steve Ditko and Stan Lee, *Amazing Spider-Man #1*, vol. 1 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1963); Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, *Avengers #1*, vol. 1 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1963); Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, *Uncanny X-Men #1*, vol.

malcontent, misunderstood, or confused.”⁴ The new Marvel superheroes were, according to then editor and current industry legend Stan Lee, designed to speak and react like real people; they had hangups, were introspective and brooding, and they could “lose a fight, make dumb mistakes, have acne, have trouble with girls, and not... much money.”⁵

Whereas Marvel superheroes were imperfect and representative of “the combative and rebellious time of the 1960s,” DC’s aged heroes were flawless lantern-jawed heroic archetypes still reveling in Cold War conformity.⁶ According to Frank Miller, Marvel’s creative staff (Lee, Ditko, and Kirby) “added a new chapter to the Mythology of the American Superhero. They created a host of new characters, fresh born to feed a new generation of readers who found in *Spider-man* and *The Fantastic Four* the vitality that had been drained from the DC heroes.”⁷

DC’s Changing of the Guard

In a move that shocked DC Comics, a young woman named Jenette Kahn was tapped to revitalize DC’s comic books. Kahn’s position, first as the DC Comic’s head of publishing and eventually its president, was unique. Kahn came to the company as an outsider in an industry that valued insularity. In 1969 Kahn began her post-college career by writing art criticism for the magazine *Art in America*. Poorly paid, Kahn moved into the magazine industry. After securing funding from Boston financiers in 1970, Kahn and a partner started a magazine titled *Kids*, a publication that, as its tagline suggested, was “written by kids for kids.” The magazine was eventually sold off to another company in

1 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1963); Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, *Daredevil #1*, vol. 1 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1964).

⁴ Lopes, *Demanding Respect*, 64.

⁵ Saul Braun, “Shazam! Here Comes Captain Relevant,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1971, SM-42.

⁶ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 184–187; Lopes, *Demanding Respect*, 64.

⁷ Frank Miller, “The Price,” *Starlog Presents Comics Scene*, March 1982, 37.

1973. However, Kahn recalled that “publishing was in my blood and I wanted to create a second magazine.” This second magazine, *Dynamite*, began its run in 1974, although Kahn and the publisher, Scholastic Book Clubs, were often at odds and the two parted ways less than a year after the *Dynamite* first hit newsstands. Kahn followed *Dynamite* with *Smash*, a periodical focused on mediums of popular culture (film, television, books). This brought her to the attention of Bill Sarnoff, chairman of Warner Publishing, the corporate entity of which DC Comics was a part.⁸ In 1976, with DC struggling under the weight of its humdrum titles Sarnoff replaced Carmine Infantino, then president of publishing, with the twenty-eight year old Kahn in hopes that she would “breathe new life into DC’s publishing branch, which appeared more and more as a dead weight in Warner’s empire.”⁹

Kahn’s age and gender did not immediately ingratiate her with many members of DC’s otherwise all-male editorial and executive staff. Kahn’s employment as a high-ranking executive position had a profound impact on other employees, resulting in a certain amount of alarm and apprehension amongst staff members. Fearing that their jobs were in jeopardy, many of those under Kahn quickly became ‘yes-men’, attempting to garner favor with their new boss. Others, however, were less willing to cooperate with Kahn’s in her new leadership role. While many of the editorial and executive staff came around to Kahn’s presence, her direct superior, Sol Harrison, viewed Kahn as an interloper challenging his position.¹⁰

Harrison’s dissatisfaction with Kahn’s appointment made their working relationship tense, forcing the two to divide their efforts into separate spheres until

⁸ Bob Greenberger, “The Path of Kahn,” *Back Issue*, July 2012, 5–7.

⁹ Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, 73.

¹⁰ Greenberger, “The Path of Kahn,” 8–12.

Harrison's retirement in 1980. Public relations, vendor contracts, and production decision regarding the covers of the company's monthly titles fell to Harrison. Kahn, on the other hand, took the reins regarding publication content. Upon her hiring Kahn was given a box of comics with which to familiarize herself with the company's material. Growing up as a consumer of the medium, Kahn was initially excited about the prospect of reading comic books as part of her new job, but to her "surprise, so few of DC's titles were really good. First and foremost," Kahn thought, DC Comics had to get its "creative [team] in order." If Kahn were willing to tiptoe around the company's boy's-club culture, she would not abide the company's lackluster publications. On the development front, Kahn assembled new creative teams by reorganizing existing staff within DC's publishing house. She created an art director position, of which Vincent Colletta was put in charge and tasked with ensuring a striking visual aesthetic throughout the company's publications. Artist Joe Orlando and writer Paul Levitz were put in charge of scouting talent and managing the tone and quality of scripts in hopes of improving their overall quality.¹¹ Indeed, it was under Kahn's early direction that the company completely overhauled their three most popular characters—Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman.

DC's most recognizable character, Superman, underwent key changes under Kahn's editorial vision. Readers were introduced to a litany of extended characters, including previously unheard-of friends and even amiable next-door neighbors; Superman was also increasingly placed within the context of real-world issues, although almost exclusively as an agent of the American state. However, most notably the

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

character's powers were scaled back making him less god-like than previous iterations.¹² Like his caped contemporary, Batman was also reimagined in the late 1970s. By and large the character was depicted as darker, more muscular, and less forgiving of criminality than the saccharine and campy Batman of the previous decade. The Batman comics of the late 1970s also underscored the Jekyll and Hyde dynamic between the Batman and Bruce Wayne personas that became a popular characteristic of the hero.¹³ Wonder Woman was updated to reflect a more feminist perspective, wherein her physical proportions became more realistic and the rather scanty costume for which the character had become known was increasingly replaced with more concealing clothing. Wonder Woman's back-story was also changed; no longer imbued with mystical powers or a descendant of Ares; the new characterization was meant to appeal a feminist aesthetic.¹⁴ While these changes were met with equal parts contempt and commendation from fans, they were nonetheless symbolic of a new and divergent direction for DC's mainstay comics.

Although the overhaul of Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman garnered a certain amount of exposure for the characters and thus DC Comics, the recognition was largely confined to the comic book industry. Kahn also embarked on promoting DC's characters to the wider American public through different mass mediums in an effort to save the company from financial insolvency. Under Kahn's leadership the company licensed its most popular characters, earning large revenues from films, television shows,

¹² Les Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History*, ed. Chin-Yee Lai (San Francisco: First Chronical Books, 2004), 127–129; Jason M. LaTouche and Joseph J. Darowski, "Red, White, and Bruised: The Vietnam War and the Weakening of Superman," in *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 91–93.

¹³ Les Daniels, *Batman: The Complete History* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999), 134–136; Andreas Reichstein, "Batman - An American Mr. Hyde?," *Amerikastudien* 43, no. 2 (1998): 335.

¹⁴ Les Daniels, *Wonder Woman: The Complete History*, ed. Chin-Yee Lai (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000), 123–129.

and “some 300 items – such as superhero bath towels, sheets, drinking cups, and toys...”¹⁵ It was also under Kahn that DC licensed their most popular character, Superman, to the publisher’s parent company Warner Brothers Entertainment for feature film production. Released in 1978, the film was tepidly received by critics who considered *Superman: The Movie* “good, clean, simple-minded fun” and argued that if filmmakers “insisted on making a movie about Superman [it] was probably about as good as could be done.”¹⁶ Of course critical shoulder-shrugging over a movie based on a popular comic book superhero did little to stop movie-goers from experiencing *Superman: the Movie*. Though the movie was expensive for its time, costing an estimated \$55 million, it earned over \$300 million worldwide, an astounding return on the initial investment. This was followed by the unimaginatively titled *Superman II*, which although less successful, was nonetheless a profitable venture for DC and its parent company.¹⁷ The popularity of the films prompted Kahn to license products based on the new film franchise – belt buckles, underwear, watches, pillowcases, soap, velour sweatshirts, calendars, pop-up books, and novelizations of the films. Financially, the licensing model was successful; by 1980 comic books comprised only one-third of the publisher’s profit, while the remainder was revenue from licensing.¹⁸ Regardless of critics’ personal opinions of the *Superman* films or the successful *Wonder Woman* television show that aired for four years (1975-1979), comic book characters were crossing the boundaries of their peculiar medium and entering a wider public consciousness, which impacted the way in which DC Comics’ characters were being consumed.

¹⁵ Lopes, *Demanding Respect*, 73.

¹⁶ Vincent Canby, “It’s a Bird, It’s a Plane, It’s a Movie,” *New York Times*, December 15, 1978, sec. Screen, C15; Vincent Canby, “Nothing ‘Went Wrong,’” *New York Times*, December 24, 1978, sec. Film View, D11.

¹⁷ “Internet Movie Database,” *IMDB.com*, n.d., accessed September 26, 2012.

¹⁸ Lopes, *Demanding Respect*, 73–74.

At the same time Kahn was expanding the DC brand, she was also renegotiating the employment standards between DC Comics and its contract and freelance creators. Although DC Comics proper would not fall under the creatively liberating ideology of creator-owned property, wherein artists and writers owned their intellectual property, under Kahn's guidance DC made massive strides in creator rights that attracted talent to the company. Prior to Kahn's arrival, DC Comics, like other mainstream publishers, had "very few obligations to the talent. There were no royalties, no reprint payments, no share in ancillary income. Even the return of artwork occurred haphazardly and wasn't guaranteed. Having been a creator" herself, Kahn "was appalled at the lack of respect for talent." Hoping to increase the quality of work being published, Kahn sought to increase the earnings of artists and writers by allowing them a stake in their work, receiving royalties from comic, merchandise, and alternate media sales.¹⁹

A 1976 letter from Neal Adams, the artist best associated with the aesthetic popularization of Superman and Batman, in which he strongly objected to DC's work-for-hire contract policies was the impetus for Kahn's changes to creator royalty contracts. The work-for-hire contracts meant that the publisher owned the creation, or popular adaptation, of characters, as well as any original art and script work that went into their making. In short, under such contracts, the creator's intellectual property was not their own.²⁰ To convince the executives of Warner Brothers and DC Comics to concede to more equitable contracts with comic book talent, Kahn used two arguing points. First she argued for the proposed radical shift in creator rights on moral grounds: paying their creators more and giving them a stake in their creations was something of an ethical

¹⁹ Kahn, A Chat with Kahn by Jennifer M. Contino.

²⁰ Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, 188.

imperative, although Kahn admitted such an argument did not likely sway the board members. Kahn's second argument was that by giving creators higher pay and royalties on new intellectual properties, DC would get better quality stories and subsequently higher sales numbers.²¹

It took five years for any concrete changes in the work-for-hire policy to manifest within DC Comics; however, by 1981 Warner had acquiesced, at least partially, to the demands of Kahn and the comic creators. A profit sharing model for writers and artists on books that sold over 100,000 per month was instituted.²² Although it took several years for DC's new policies to garner popularity with creators due to long standing apprehension over the company's work-for-hire policies, by 1985 the publisher had changed the minds of many creators. Though this was hardly the creator-owned property model for which Neal Adams and other artists and writers had clamored, it was eventually effective in wooing writers and artists to the DC fold, including Frank Miller who in the late 1970s helped make Marvel's *Daredevil* series, initially a b-list publication, into a wildly popular monthly title.²³ By 1985 the profit-sharing model had increased the average annual income of artists and writers to \$50,000 a year, which, if adjusted for inflation would be a six-figure salary of approximately \$111,360 in 2012.²⁴

The general increase of creator salaries was caused by higher comic book sales, a product of a change in distribution models and the subsequent rise of stand-alone comic book retailers. Mainstream publishers were turning towards the direct sales market to distribute their comics. Direct sales differed greatly from the previous vendor distribution

²¹ Greenberger, "The Path of Kahn," 15–17.

²² Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 262.

²³ Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, 189.

²⁴ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 262; United States Department of Labor, "Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator," *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 2012, bls.gov. Although the income of artists and writers increased at this time, the salaries of inkers, letterers, and colorists remained largely unchanged.

model. Despite its nearly forty years of practice, vendor distribution was a costly endeavor for publishers. Comics, ordered on consignment by vendors, were initially sold in drug stores and supermarkets; the unsold comics, usually anywhere between forty and sixty percent of those shipped, were sent back to publishers and subsequently destroyed. In the 1960s, publishers attempted to cut costs by implementing an honor-based system with their vendors. Vendors were expected to destroy unsold comics as opposed to, at the publisher's expense, shipping them back to comic distribution centers. The honor system was a failure; many vendors created a comic book black market by hoarding popular titles and creating artificial consumer demand, selling the comics to collectors and fans at exorbitantly high prices.²⁵ Furthermore, traditional vendors—newsstand, pharmacies, and supermarkets—were waning. For traditional retailers, the profit margin of comic books was too high and the in-store real estate used to sell them far too high. As the 1970s pressed on, vendor retailers waned and, by 1979, comprised only 15% of comic sales.²⁶

Under Kahn, DC Comics entered the direct sales market in hopes of undercutting black market sale of comics and increase overall sales of its monthly titles. Unlike the previous vendor model, direct sales had retailers purchase the comics from the publishers, as oppose to operating on credit, and any unsold issues became the property of the store to be sold to fans, collectors, and new consumers of the medium as back issues. The result of direct sales was that the initial cost to publishers was reduced; publishers could press two-thirds as many comics while earning greater profits.²⁷

If the vendor model used established businesses, the direct sales market also prompted a rise in the amount of specialty retailers operating in the United States. The

²⁵ Lopes, *Demanding Respect*, 100–101.

²⁶ Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, 140–142.

²⁷ Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 132–133.

increase in retailers specializing in comic book sales was meteoric. In 1972, there was an estimated 22 dedicated comic book retailers operating in the United States.²⁸ By the mid-1970s this had increased to approximately 750 and by the end of the decade there were nearly 3,000.²⁹ The comic book shop was perhaps the most important development of direct sales, even more so considering their dazzling proliferation. The dedicated retail space allowed publishers and merchants to focus advertising efforts, which resulted in an overall increase of comic sales. Merchants could cater to fan and collector demands by creating personal ‘mailboxes’ for pre-arranged subscriptions, selling licensed merchandise and collector paraphernalia, as well as providing a salable back catalog of comics. Consumers also benefitted from the new retail space. The ‘comic shop’ became a unique cultural landscape and created a kind of clubhouse haven where fans and collectors could congregate to discuss and consume comics. While the comic shop proved to be an important development in the industry, it was far from perfect. The comic shop was (and largely still is) a gendered and aged retail-scape where women and adults found themselves ostracized by young male fans and employees.³⁰

With women and adult comic consumers largely, but not necessarily purposefully, shunned from comic shops, the bookstore became a new marketplace for DC to sell their publication. Comics sold in bookstores, however, were not the same as those sold in comic shops; they were collected bound copies composed of certain story arcs that had previously been published in a monthly comic series. These bound editions were called graphic novels, a term whose origin and precise definition is still contested. Will Eisner

²⁸ Lopes, *Demanding Respect*, 99.

²⁹ Michael Dean, “Fine Young Cannibals,” *The Comics Journal*, July 2006, 54.

³⁰ Brian Swafford, “Critical Ethnography: The Comic Shop as Cultural Clubhouse,” in *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, ed. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith (New York: Routledge, 2012), 291–295.

claimed to have coined the term in 1978 when trying to have *A Contract with God* published, while a series of independent comix publications claimed to have had it printed on their cover first.³¹ There is no consensus on what constitutes a graphic novel: it was, and continues to be, primarily a marketing term used to appeal to adult readers who purchased the medium in book stores as oppose to specialty shops. Kahn, recognizing the small but growing number of bookstore comic consumers, exploited the salability of graphic novels by using DC Comics' existing periodical comic format.

DC began implementing terminal storylines in mini and maxi-series that, unlike ongoing monthly mainstream superhero comics, had close ended story lines. DC's mini-series were published in two to six issues and their maxi-series between seven and twelve.³² Although the literary and artistic content of a collected and bound graphic novel differed little from the monthly comics of which it was composed, the physical product was aesthetically different. Internally DC referred to the aesthetic differences as the 'prestige format', which shared the hallmarks of what today's comic consumers would recognize as a 'graphic novel'. Prestige format books tended to be have a larger page count, higher quality paper, and a glued square binding as oppose to the stapled binding of traditional comic books. The new production aesthetic allowed for the initial movement of comic books to take their place on bookstore shelves, earning higher visibility amongst adult readers unfamiliar with or unwilling to enter specialty comic retailers.³³

³¹ Andrew D. Arnold, "The Graphic Novel Silver Anniversary," *Time*, November 2003.

³² Mark Rogers, "Political Economy: Manipulating Demand and 'The Death of Superman'," in *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, ed. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith (New York; London: Routledge, 2012), 149–150.

³³ Walter Ryce, "Graphic Novels Come of Age - in Monterey County and Around the World," *Monterey County Weekly*, February 18, 2010, sec. Notes from the Underground.

The sales of prestige format books were impressive; it became increasingly common for graphic novels to sell 100,000 copies even after their previous release as monthly comics.³⁴ With such a large sales volume to a growing adult readership, Kahn along with DC Comics' parent company, Warner Communications, created the 'DC Line of Comics', a separate advertising entity from the more wholesome and child oriented titles, which fell under their 'Superman Line of Comics'. The new advertising campaign was based on demographic data; readers of the Superman Line averaged 13 years of age and their income was invariably tied to that of their parents. Conversely, the DC Line's average reader was twenty four and had an average annual income of \$38,000, and spent \$40-\$60 a month on comic books. The DC Line advertised cars, cameras, and computers as oppose to video games, toys, candy, and soda found in the Superman Line.³⁵

By the early 1980s, DC had started to reverse its image as a publisher of dull comics. This change in public image was facilitated by the expansion of the medium to adult audiences sold in bookstores and the rise of specialized retail spaces, combined with a more equitable royalty system and Kahn's insistence on creative experimentation in what became a "DC maxim, that if [creators] weren't writing off a certain amount of material each year as unusable, then [they] weren't doing [their] job. If everything [they] did was publishable, [they] weren't taking enough chances."³⁶ The creative drive and potential for higher royalty payments for a best-selling comic became a catalyst for titles like *Frank Miller's Ronin* and Alan Moore's run on *Swamp Thing*, both of which helped establish the 'cult of the writer'.

³⁴ Lynn Ames, "Fifty Years of Batman at the Cartoon Museum: The Dark Knight Made Changes over the Years," *New York Times*, October 29, 1989, WC11.

³⁵ Randall Rothenberg, "D.C. Comics In New Push To Sell Space," *New York Times*, December 22, 1988, sec. Advertising, D20.

³⁶ Kahn, A Chat with Kahn by Jennifer M. Contino.

Before the early 1980s, the fame of comic writers was usually tempered with the fame of the artists—the progression of comic narratives, though not wholly disproportionate, had favored the latter. The early and mid-1980s, however, saw a paradigmatic shift of traditional roles of importance.³⁷ Despite the comic book's equal use of word and picture, the 1980s saw a surge in the depth and complexity of writing that was profoundly different from what was (perhaps with the exception of EC's titles between 1950-1954) being published in previous decades. However, with the newer and more complex comic scripts public attention began to skew toward a new batch of young writers. Writers like Frank Miller and Alan Moore (the subjects of the following chapter) began writing mature and nuanced scripts, readers began associating writers with particular titles. DC who, using a writer's newfound celebrity status, fostered the relationship between a writer and comic book series quickly exploited the association fans made between certain authors and quality comics.

Frank Miller, the writer and one of several artists on *Ronin*, was lured away from Marvel by Kahn with promises of higher royalty payments, creative autonomy, and the total ownership of his intellectual property, the latter of which was almost unique in mainstream comic contracts.³⁸ The result of Miller and Kahn's agreement was *Frank Miller's Ronin*; published between 1983 and 1984, this was a twelve issue maxi-series produced on higher quality paper stock that used inking techniques usually reserved for

³⁷ Julian Darius, "The Cult of the Writer," *Sequart Research & Literacy Organization*, August 25, 2002, sequart.org/magazine. The nature of the comic book industry often sees multiple writers and artists working on the same series over time. Alan Moore, for example, began working in the United States as the writer on *Swamp Thing* in the mid-1980s, and did so for several years. Over that same period of time *Swamp Thing* was illustrated by nine different artists. Moore's writing stayed consistent while the visuals did not. Thus it is often referred to as 'Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing*,' which denotes his work on the series beginning with issue #20 and concluding with issue #64.

³⁸ Kahn, A Chat with Kahn by Jennifer M. Contino; Kim Thompson, "Return of the Dark Knight: Frank Miller," *The Comics Journal*, August 1985, 44–45.

magazines.³⁹ The cult of the writer is clearly manifested in this title; it was not simply *Ronin* but instead *Frank Miller's Ronin*. While there is no doubt that Miller was responsible for the script, aesthetic direction, and art work of the title, DC felt it prudent to prominently display and include Miller's name in the title proper in an effort to use the young writer's fame to increase sales.⁴⁰

DC's use of comic book covers to promote the 'cult of the writer' was also manifested in Alan Moore's run on DC's waning *Swamp Thing* which began in January 1984. Moore, according to literary theorist Brian Johnson, "transformed *Swamp Thing* from a gothic monster serial into an ecologically-conscious horror comic... with scathing depictions of the environmental depredations wrought by everyone from non-recycling suburbanites to the American military-industrial complex."⁴¹ Moore's scripts also subtly but overtly broached human sexuality, a rarity in mainstream comics at the time.⁴² Moore's cult status, however, was not as immediate as that of Miller. Though Moore's first *Swamp Thing* script was used in the series' twentieth issue (January 1984), the writer's name did not begin appearing on the cover until the printing of *Swamp Thing* #25 in June of the same year. However, by *Swamp Thing* #58 only Moore's last name appeared on the comic's cover, indicating that the writer had become somewhat synonymous with the series.⁴³

³⁹ Mark Salisbury, "Frank Miller," in *Writers on Comic Script Writing* (London: Titan Books, 1999), 192–193.

⁴⁰ Frank Miller, John Costanza, and Lynn Varley, *Frank Miller's Ronin*, 3rd ed. (New York: DC Comics, 1995), Cover.

⁴¹ Brian Johnson, "Libidinal Ecologies: Eroticism and Environmentalism in *Swamp Thing*," in *Sexual Ideology in the Works of Alan Moore* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2012), 16–18.

⁴² Matthew Candelaria, "Green Love, Red Sex: The Conflation of the Flora and the Flesh in *Swamp Thing*," in *Sexual Ideology in the Works of Alan Moore* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2012), 28–29; 38.

⁴³ Alan Moore, Dan Ray, and John Totleben, *Swamp Thing* #20, vol. 2 (New York: DC Comics, 1984), Cover; Alan Moore, Stephen R. Bissette, and John Totleben, *Swamp Thing* #25, vol. 2 (New York: DC

DC also associated Miller and Moore with certain writing characteristics that strayed from the wholesome and unsophisticated *Superman* superhero comics. Unsurprisingly, DC marketing associated Miller with violence as this was the very characteristic for which the writer had become well known while scripting *Daredevil* at Marvel. *Ronin* was designed to be a violent, dark, and bloody homage to British steampunk and Japanese manga fiction from which Miller drew inspiration. In an interview in 1981, while Miller was writing the script for *Ronin*, the author proclaimed that the genres were,

as violent as anything I've ever seen... The violence in them is rather honest. They're willing to be violent, and admit that that's what they want in their fiction. I think that we [Americans] are much more hypocritical about it. Violence in fiction has a stigma attached to it here. It's obvious that people want it; it's obvious that people get a certain degree of pleasure out of it; and it's obvious that people feel guilty about it.⁴⁴

Conversely, the maturity of Moore's *Swamp Thing* scripts was advertised quite differently. Moore's combination of standard superhero tropes with a certain amount of psychological realism was largely missing from other mainstream comics.⁴⁵ In response, DC placed on the comic's cover just above the title and in bold lettering, the words "Sophisticated Suspense," on multiple issues of *Swamp Thing*.⁴⁶ *Swamp Thing*'s claim to sophistication was very much by design; Moore's *Swamp Thing* scripts were purposefully poetic and attempted to subvert the uninspired writing of most mainstream comics. In a 1988 interview Moore asserted the role of writers in the sophistication of the medium:

Comics, 1984), Cover; Alan Moore, Rick Veitch, and Alfredo Alcalá, *Swamp Thing* #58, vol. 2 (New York: DC Comics, 1987), Cover.

⁴⁴ Dwight R. Decker, "Frank Miller: A Talk with the Writer-Artist of *Daredevil*," *The Comics Journal*, Winter -1982 1981, 31.

⁴⁵ Terrence R. Wandtke, ed., *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!: Essays on the Revision of Characters in Comic Books, Film and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2007), 29.

⁴⁶ Alan Moore and Ron Randall, *Swamp Thing* #33, vol. 2 (New York: DC Comics, 1985), Cover. *Swamp Thing* #33 marked the first use of the 'Sophisticated Suspense' tag line, it appeared on other *Swamp Thing* covers periodically until Moore's last issue, *Swamp Thing* #64.

Perhaps because in school [readers have] had hosts of golden daffodils crammed down their throats and came away thinking that's what poetry is all about. In *Swamp Thing* you may not have good poetry, but there is a poetry there which people can read and enjoy and perhaps see how poetry can be connected to a larger world of ideas. It might be possible, actually, to give back politics and poetry to people through [comic books].⁴⁷

Moore believed that the medium was capable of profound complexity and could be geared toward an adult readership not merely through violence, as had been the case with *Ronin*, but also through the incorporation of socially conscious narratives.

By the mid-1980s Kahn's changes to the company had started to pay off. Licensing characters allowed the company financial breathing room as it pushed its new doctrine of creativity, overcame decades of bad blood between the company and talent, created new publishing formats, and marketed DC's burgeoning writing talents, namely Miller and Moore, appropriately. All of these factors led to the publication of decidedly mature comics like *Ronin* and *Swamp Thing*. And although *Ronin* and *Swamp Thing* were successful in their own right, it was a momentous 1986 that saw these various factors—creators, executives, and publishers—begin mature the comic book medium. Kahn remembers fondly that,

For more than a decade, [DC Comics] had been working and laying the groundwork to fundamentally change the industry, to see that talent got the rights they deserved, to change the methods of distribution so comic books were profitable where they hadn't been, to move comics from an ephemeral kids medium to a sophisticated art form. And we were lucky that a confluence of all that good work resulted in a banner year for DC. I don't think we ever felt there was too much going on. It was an exhilarating time where we felt we were seeing the fruits of our labors. The fact that so many good things happened in the same year was not entirely by design, but revamping our top three characters [Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman] was.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Christopher Sharrett, "Alan Moore," *David Kraft's Comics Interview*, 1988, 23.

⁴⁸ Greenberger, "The Path of Kahn," 27.

While 1986 was largely a product of historical contingency, the end result was conclusive—DC had moved “into territory that was not only more sophisticated and literary, but where the content was more graphic, more sexual, more violent, and more provocative.”⁴⁹ This territory of a maturing medium was, at least in the case of DC Comics, at first embodied by Frank Miller’s *Batman: the Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore’s work on *Watchmen* and the US publication of *V for Vendetta*.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 29.

Chapter 3

There was an incredible sense of the new coming from Frank Miller and this handful of crazy Brits... who were seeing possibilities in [comics], in the kinds of stories that could be told, and not incidentally, in the way a story could be presented.¹

-Tim Sale

After the near collapse of the comic industry in the mid-1970s, the early years of the following decade saw something of a rebound. Marvel's sales were increasing, however, DC's remained largely stagnant, reaching an all time low, in 1985 of approximately two million copies a month. By 1987, however, DC's monthly sales had increased by an impressive million issues per month.² Although DC continued to publish its regular titles, it was the works of Frank Miller and Alan Moore that helped shift DC's waning sales into an upward trajectory. During its initial release comic shops were frequently sold out of *Dark Knight Returns*, leading William Leibowitz, owner of Golden Apple Comics to exclaim, "This [*Dark Knight Returns*] will easily be the best-selling comic book of the last five years, and it's generating lots of interest in non-comics readers."³

As the decade closed attitudes towards comic books were changing. "The late 1980s saw a sort of artistic renaissance," as *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns* "did for old notions of The Superhero what Freud did for everybody's mother."⁴ Indeed, the comic book landscape would be forever changed before the 1980s came to a close, with Moore and Miller spearheading the charge of mature mainstream comics. Miller was responsible for re-imagining one of DC's most popular and long-lived character and

¹ Tim Sale, "Introduction," in *Batman: The Killing Joke*, Deluxe Hardcover (New York: DC Comics, 2008), 4.

² Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 21–22.

³ Steve Pond, "The Darker Side of Batman Emerges," *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1986, D8.

⁴ Glenn Gaslin, "The Disappearing Comic Book," *Los Angeles Times*, July 2001, E1.

setting – Batman and Gotham City – in his seminal works *Batman: the Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Year One*. Moore, too, took his hand at updating several of DC’s veteran characters, notably Batman’s arch nemesis Joker, in *The Killing Joke* and *Swamp Thing* in a comic of the same name. More importantly, however, was Moore’s introduction of the new protagonists and antagonists found in the pages of *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta*.

Both Frank Miller and Alan Moore saw American comics as puerile in flow, form, and function, a fact that made American comics inferior to the higher artistic, literary, and production values of their French and Italian counterparts. In 1981 Miller publicly lamented, “America is so far behind in exploiting an adult audience... there certainly isn’t any great movement toward broadening the scope of what comics are doing in America. Some things are happening, but not enough...but it [the American comic industry] really has yet to produce anything that will grab an older audience.”⁵ Such a position changed when DC Comics published *Batman: the Dark Knight Returns*, written by Miller and illustrated by Klaus Janson and Lynn Varley along with *Watchmen*, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, in 1986.

The Batman...

The story of Miller’s *Dark Knight Returns*’ Batman and the shadowed labyrinthine alleyways of violence and crime that flow through his vision of Gotham City were born, oddly enough, in the safe and well lit isle of a Montpelier, Vermont department store in 1963, over two decades before *The Dark Knight Returns* was published. Miller affectionately recalls his first experience with a *Batman* comic in the

⁵ Decker, “Frank Miller: A Talk with the Writer-Artist of Daredevil,” 89–90.

store. “I came across an 80-page Giant comic starring Batman.” Miller recounts, “I open it. I look it over. I fall in.”⁶ In 1976, Miller moved from Vermont to New York City, where the twenty-year-old artist and writer found himself going days without food and sitting by the city’s docks or making sketches in upper Manhattan. After struggling in the comic industry Miller was given his first major run on Marvel Comics’ *Daredevil* series in 1981. Daredevil’s vigilantism disturbed some young comic readers and, at the time, Miller’s *Daredevil* was considered “the most violent comic book being published.”⁷ Miller’s work in the pages of *Daredevil* posited the character as a violent and vengeful vigilante.⁸

This notion of a heavy-handed, albeit heroic, vigilante would become the basis of Miller’s characterization of Batman, which he presented to Dick Giordano, DC Comics’ lead editor at the time, while on a plane in 1985. Miller laid out his thoughts about a potential re-launch of the popular character. Miller came upon the idea of an alternate Batman while sitting in his apartment, nearing his thirtieth birthday, upset that he was about to turn one year older than the perpetually twenty nine year old Bruce Wayne. Miller imagined Wayne not as the perpetual late-twenties playboy but an old man whom had long since retired from crime fighting, only to have Gotham need him once again.⁹ Miller’s take on Batman’s age is plain; the first scene in which Bruce Wayne appears his

⁶ Frank Miller, “Introduction,” in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, 10th Anniv. (New York: DC Comics, 1996), 6.

⁷ Decker, “Frank Miller: A Talk with the Writer-Artist of Daredevil,” 75.

⁸ Frank Miller, Roger McKenzie, and Klaus Janson, *Daredevil*, vol. 164 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1980), 9.

⁹ Miller, “Introduction,” 6–7.

hair is gray, his face wrinkled, and a white mustache graces his upper lip – although the character has not lost any of his characteristic physique.¹⁰

Originally published from February to June of 1986, Miller’s four-issue run on *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* is not DC canon, nor was it meant to be. It stands alone within the DC Universe as a singular story. In *Dark Knight Returns* Miller tells the story of an aged and retired Batman in a Gotham City increasingly plagued by crime and violence. Batman responds by coming out of retirement and re-entering the world of superheroes. Unlike previous *Batman* comics, however, Miller’s Batman is a secondary focus of the story; the character does not appear in costume for the first twenty-six pages of issue number one.¹¹ Instead, Miller focuses on Gotham City as its own entity and a space within which to discuss and dissect the social debates of the late 1980s. Critics did not universally applaud these changes. Writing for the *New York Times*, Mordecai Richler condemned *The Dark Knight Returns* precisely for what makes the comic distinct from its predecessors,

The real antagonists, in a Gotham City that crawls with scum, are not so much the traditional villains as wish-washy liberals bent on frustrating a Rambo-type solution to crime. The stories are convoluted, difficult to follow and crammed with far too much text. The drawings offer a grotesquely muscle-bound Batman and Superman, not the lovable champions of old.¹²

Richler saw the ‘wishy-washy liberals’ as an antagonistic force, not one side of a larger conversation about state power structures, police vigilantism, and a commentary on both liberalism and conservatism in the United States. Richler appeared to be a comic antiquarian, relishing the shallow stories of Dick Tracy and Lil’ Abner he consumed as a

¹⁰ Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, 10th Anniversary (New York: DC Comics, 1996), 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Book I, 1–26.

¹² Mordecai Richler, “Batman at Midlife: Or, the Funnies Grow Up,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1987, BR35.

youth. Similarly, he looked fondly upon the older adventures of Batman, citing specifically a time when the Joker copyrighted the alphabet as “a real plot zinger.”¹³ Considering Richler’s personal preferences, it is little surprise that he found Miller’s work convoluted and wordy, and most certainly devoid of ‘the lovable champions of old’.

This illustrates, rather poignantly, that *Dark Knight Returns* was a profound divergence not only from previous iterations of the characters but also the relatively unsophisticated structure and simplicity of previous mainstream comic narratives. Of course the changes Richler condemned were very much a part of Miller’s design. According to Miller, comforting the reading audience was not the job of the creator. Conversely, Miller’s job was to “give them [the audience] something that they don’t expect, maybe even something they don’t want...”¹⁴ Indeed, in the *Dark Knight Returns*, Miller shattered the strained relationship between Bruce Wayne and the character’s alert ego, Batman, leaving the latter the only remaining psyche of a once split personality. The dominance of the Batman personality over that of philanthropist Bruce Wayne was a profound change to the Caped Crusader and allowed for a closer association of Batman with the story’s villains. Interestingly, despite clear villains in the story—The Mutants, Two-Face, and the Joker—Batman is never portrayed as an opposite, only an oppositional force.¹⁵ Miller’s Batman character was increasingly indiscernible from the comic’s villains. Indeed, parallels between the hero and his nemesis punctuate almost every confrontation between the Batman of *Dark Knight Returns* and the work’s villains.

These mental and emotional similarities with his enemies are established early in *Dark Knight Returns*. As the first chapter of the story came to a close, Batman confronts

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Decker, “Frank Miller: A Talk with the Writer-Artist of Daredevil,” 88.

¹⁵ Reichstein, “Batman - An American Mr. Hyde?,” 339–340.

Harvey Dent. At one time half of Dent's face had been horribly deformed (an occurrence for which he blamed Batman) and caused the psychotic break that initiated the character into the pantheon of Batman's most prolific villains. However, in *The Dark Knight Returns* Dent's face has been surgically reconstructed and for all intents and purposes looked completely normal. During the confrontation Batman recognizes that "the [mental] scars," however, "go deep. Too deep." Despite his perfectly reconstructed face, Dent still sees himself as a monster. Batman admits, both personally and to Dent, that when he looks at Harvey he sees a reflection of himself.¹⁶ Similarly, during the engagement between Batman and the Joker, Batman admits to having spent a considerable amount of time vividly picturing the many ways in which he would murder Joker, "treasuring each imaginary moment." At the end of the chapter Batman murders Joker by breaking the villain's neck.¹⁷ Batman's most prominent association with Gotham's criminal element, however, is found in his association with the Mutants. The Mutants and Batman share several similarities; both operate clandestinely, use violence, robbery, threats, and excessive force when discharging their particular brand of justice, and share a similar worldview. In a television broadcast the shadowy leader of the Mutants tells Gotham's citizens, "Don't call us [the Mutants] criminals. We are the law. We are the future. Gotham City belongs to the Mutants."¹⁸ This mirrors a speech given by Batman to the remainder of the Mutants, who had since become a vigilante force called Sons of the Batman. Batman closes his speech by saying "Tonight *we* are the law. Tonight, *I* am the law."¹⁹ Batman's relationship with criminality is further cemented in

¹⁶ Miller, Janson, and Varley, *Dark Knight Returns*, Book I, 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Book III, 142.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Book II, 61.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Book III, 173.

the last panels of *Dark Knight Returns*, as he educates ex-members of the Mutants to become vigilantes and “bring sense to a world plagued by worse than thieves and murderers.”²⁰

Although Miller’s treatment of the comic’s titular character diverged greatly from the nearly forty years of *Batman* comics published prior to *Dark Knight Returns*, and the violence contained within its pages was certainly unheard of in mainstream comics at the time, Miller’s role in the maturation of the medium extended beyond depictions of savagery and similarities between hero and villain. Miller’s script for *Dark Knight Returns* marked one of the first instances a popular mainstream comic addressed convoluted and contentious social issues. Much, but not all, of the story’s social, political, and cultural subtext is manifested in the social apparatus of televised news programming and ‘man-on-the-street’ conversations. The subjects—violence and its role in vigilantism, individual rights, and the role of the state in the face of the Cold War—were used to frame real-world debates between liberal and conservative viewpoints.

In the plot of *Dark Knight Returns*, Batman’s re-emergence after a forty-year absence initiates a public debate on the role of a vigilante specifically and the negotiation of the social contract in particular. The social contract here is defined as the willingness of a community to submit to the authority of vigilantism in exchange for protection but at the potential cost of their legal rights.²¹ During a televised debate show titled ‘Point vs. Point’ Miller portrays two different viewpoints on Batman’s vigilantism. On the one hand, Miller presents a stereotypical liberal viewpoint that describes Batman as a “social fascist.” Miller’s use of the term fascist evokes social authoritarianism; and indeed,

²⁰ Ibid., Book IV, 199.

²¹ William A. Darity Jr., ed., “Social Contract,” *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2008), 581.

Batman acts as a criminal and commits acts of excessive force, assault, breaking and entering, and reckless endangerment in the name of social control. On the other hand, Miller offers a law and order, or stereotypical conservative, point of view, which asserts that, while Batman may have been committing crimes, the fact that such crimes were committed against criminals is justification for the character's criminal behavior.²²

Miller's script establishes a near pure dichotomy between liberal and conservative social agendas that informs the comic's examination of individual rights and state power. In an interview published just before the publication of *Dark Knight Returns*, Miller admitted that "there [was] a touch of the fascist in" Batman. In Miller's script this is manifested in Batman's disdain for the rights afforded to criminals.²³ After breaking into the home of a criminal who was just released from the hospital, Batman proceeds to mortally wound the malfasant. During the course of the impromptu interrogation the criminal exclaims, "Stay back – I got rights." Batman, noting the criminal's impending death, replies, "You've got rights, lots of right. Sometimes I count them just to make myself crazy," and subsequently denies the dying criminal medical treatment.²⁴ Batman is further associated with 'law and order' vigilantism when he murders Four-Star General Nathan Briggs who had been selling weapons to the Mutants to cover the cost of an experimental treatment for Hodgkin's disease.²⁵ Miller's Batman sees the world as black and white; in Miller's view, violence or the threat of violence must be met with similar, if not more, violence.

²² Miller, Janson, and Varley, *Dark Knight Returns*, Book I, 42.

²³ Thompson, "Return of the Dark Knight: Frank Miller," 61–62.

²⁴ Miller, Janson, and Varley, *Dark Knight Returns*, Book I, 45.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Book II, 70.

Miller's take on Batman's vigilantism and the media coverage of the character's actions were influenced by a real-world corollary – Bernhard Goetz. On December 22nd 1984 Goetz claimed to have been accosted by four black males in a subway station. Goetz, stating that he feared for his life, produced an unregistered revolver and fired five shots. Each of the four young men was shot, one of whom was comatose for several weeks and permanently paralyzed, Goetz, however, was remorseless over the outcome.²⁶ In the New York press Goetz became known as the 'Subway Vigilante' a term used both pejoratively and complimentarily by Goetz's various detractors and supporters. Ultimately, Goetz was acquitted of the four attempted murder and assault charges, and indicted only on a single count of illegal weapon possession.²⁷ According to legal historian George P. Fletcher, the Goetz case became a subject where its mere mention elicited

a poignant and often passionate comment. Whether a stranger on an airplane or a passerby in a café, everyone had an opinion about the rights and wrongs of Goetz's shooting. Doormen and cab drivers became instant social philosophers. Nurses, dentists, shopkeepers, waiters – no one was at a loss for an opinion about what should be done in a case that touched our instinct to survive in an America ridden by poverty and violence.²⁸

Miller borrowed the social context and public debate over the Goetz case and placed it within *Dark Knight Returns*' plotline. "Think of the noise that came from what Bernie Goetz did," Miller stated in an interview conducted in 1986, "and imagine if there was a very powerful, huge, terrifying figure doing that on a regular basis."²⁹

²⁶ Esther B. Fein, "Lawyer Says Goetz Does Not Feel 'Remorse' Over Subway Shooting," *New York Times*, January 28, 1985, B4.

²⁷ The Associated Press, "Goetz Attends Man's Hearing in Subway Case," *New York Times*, February 25, 1985, B3.

²⁸ George P. Fletcher, *A Crime of Self-Defense: Bernhard Goetz and the Law on Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), ix.

²⁹ Pond, "The Darker Side of Batman Emerges," D8.

In contrast to the strong conservative characters of *Dark Knight Returns*, Miller painted liberals as completely detached from the world they inhabited. In two instances, the parents of Carrie Kelly, the thirteen-year-old girl playing the role of Robin in Miller's script, hold conversations in which they characterize Batman as a fascist, claim the American conscience died with the Kennedys, and refer to police as "machismo with a badge."³⁰ While these conversations, and several others, provided a counterpoint to the conservative views voiced in *Dark Knight Returns*, they are nonetheless indicative of what Miller considered the societal "concessions of the '60s generation and [its] no-longer appropriate view of the world." The liberals presented in Miller's script are very much how Miller perceived liberals in the real world: they are unable "to overcome our moral impotence and fight," an issue not faced by an amoral vigilante like Batman.³¹

Despite *Dark Knight Returns*' admittedly biased plot, which Miller referred to as 'unapologetic propaganda,' it was very much a response to cultural shifts toward conservatism in the late 1980s.³² Indeed, the 1980s had seen a shift in political alignments. From 1972-1980 the Democratic Party enjoyed a seventeen-point lead in polls, however, by 1981 that number had been cut in half, and by 1984 polls showed that self-identified conservatives outnumbered liberals by 2-to-1.³³ Much of this is attributed by the ascendancy of Ronald Reagan to presidential power. For good and ill Reagan was viewed as either a 'police vigilante' unashamed to do what he thought was right or, conversely, an 'uncivilized vigilante' with little concern for legality.³⁴ Miller played on

³⁰ Miller, Janson, and Varley, *Dark Knight Returns*, Book I, 45; Book II, 60.

³¹ Thompson, "Return of the Dark Knight: Frank Miller," 62-63.

³² Frank Miller, "Propaganda," Personal Blog, *Frank Miller Ink*, September 23, 2011.

³³ Helmut Norpoth, "Underway and Here to Stay: Party Realignment in the 1980s?," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (Autumn 1987): 378-379.

³⁴ Mike S. Dubose, "Holding Out for a Hero: Reaganism, Comic Book Vigilantes, and Captain America," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 6 (2007): 916-917.

the real world perceptions of then president Reagan in several rare instances of political satire, all of which portrayed the president as a grinning sycophant whose vigilante status was part of a manufactured persona.³⁵ Miller's script for *Dark Knight Returns* marked a profound departure for mainstream comics at the time and used the superhero genre to reflect the vast political and cultural changes taking place in American society in the twilight of the Cold War.

... and The Bard

If DC Comics opened 1986 by producing a popular and more mature comic mini-series in *Dark Knight Returns*, the company would close the year with an even more profound maxi-series – *Watchmen*. Scripted by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* was very much a response to the creators' discomfort with the state of the medium. Moore saw mainstream superhero books as too juvenile and insipid, independent comics as generally inaccessible, and underground comix as unrefined stories preoccupied with overt depictions of sex and violence. Moore had been arguing for the maturation of comics well before *Watchmen* was published. In a 1981 interview Moore lambasted the comic book industry, lamenting that major comic book publishers were consistently turning out comics with “an intellectual and moral level rooted somewhere in the early fifties.” Moore also complained about the influence of comix, “I'd like to see an adult comic that didn't predominantly feature huge tits, spilled intestines, or the sort of brain-damaged, acid-casualty gibbering” so many comix were “fond of.”³⁶

³⁵ Miller, Janson, and Varley, *Dark Knight Returns*, Book II, 84; Book III, 108, 120.

³⁶ David Lloyd, “From the Writer's Viewpoint,” *Society of Strip Illustration Newsletter*, May 1981, 13–14.

However, Moore had grown up a consumer of the medium, specifically superhero comics. The son of working-class parents, Moore spent much of his youth reading comics at his Northampton home in England's East Midlands during the late 1950s and 60s. As a child he consumed American superhero comics like *Flash*, *Fantastic Four*, *Superman*, and the more refined heroes of the short lived Charlton comics. He was also presented with various EC Comics titles and as Moore got older he was introduced to groundbreaking independent comics including Wally Wood's *Witzend*, Will Eisner's *The Spirit*, and Robert Mayer's *Super Folks*, all of which would be manifested in *Watchmen*.³⁷

Moore's first major response to the elements of the medium and industry with which he disagreed were manifested in what has since become one of the writer's most acclaimed works, *V for Vendetta*. The title's popularity and publication in the US is its own story, and somewhat surprising considering Moore and illustrator David Lloyd purposefully designed the work to be "uniquely British rather than emulate the vast amount of American material on the market," at the time.³⁸ V, the story's main character, began as something of a traditional superhero with a large garish red 'V' dashed across his chest. However, Lloyd suggested that the character don the Guy Fawkes mask and black cloak that so defines V. Lloyd asserted, "he'd look *really* bizarre and it would give Guy Fawkes the image he's deserved all these years. We shouldn't burn the chap every

³⁷ Lance Parkin, *Alan Moore* (Harpenden, Herts: Pocket Essentials, 2009), 10–14. Mayer's *Super Folks*, published in 1977, was a satirical critique of the superhero genre and aimed toward an adult readership. This is of special mention as there were charges of plagiarism levied against Moore in regards to similarities between Mayer's comic and *Watchmen*. Mayer, Moore, and the academic community have since discounted these claims.

³⁸ Alan Moore, "Behind the Painted Smile," in *V for Vendetta*, Trade Paperback (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 2008), 270.

Nov. 5th but celebrate his attempt to blow up parliament!”³⁹ While discussing the work with Moore, Lloyd gave the writer two caveats; first, there would be none of the onomatopoeic sound effects that characterized comic book action sequences and second, there would be no thought balloons, the latter of which worried Moore as it meant internal monologues could not be used.⁴⁰

V for Vendetta takes place in a dystopian England where the fear of nuclear war has ushered in a repressive fascist government. V, a man with no name and a face covered by a Guy Fawkes mask, had taken it upon himself to topple a government that had fallen into the “hands of violent, reactionary individuals who, uncoincidentally, are unable to communicate with women.”⁴¹ Joining V is Evey, a young woman forced into prostitution to pay her bills in a society where income disparity has all but crippled the lower classes. The society of *V for Vendetta* is an Orwellian dystopia replete with government sanctioned sexual repression, constant foreign wars, a cowed media apparatus, and systematic disenfranchisement of minorities—all a direct response to Thatcherism.

V for Vendetta was conceived at a curious time in twentieth century England. Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had come to power in 1979 and began a program of isolating the United Kingdom from the European Economic Community, levied criticism against African and Asian members of the nation, and briefly invigorated British nationalism. In the summer of 1981, as Moore was on holiday in the Isle of Wight, England was experiencing the worst economic slump since 1930. Between 1979 and 1981 England’s GDP had fallen by 3.2% and unemployment had reached 2.7 million.

³⁹ Ibid., 272.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 272–274.

⁴¹ Di Liddo, *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*, 115.

During these years Britain's industrial capacity plummeted by 25% and due to governmental policies aimed at keeping the pound strong, investment in new business was difficult.⁴² Moore's distaste for Thatcherism is readily apparent in his introduction to the American trade paperback of *V for Vendetta*:

It's 1988 now. Margaret Thatcher is entering her third term of office and talking confidently of an unbroken Conservative leadership well into the next century... the tabloid presses are circulating the idea of concentration camps for persons with AIDS. The new riot police wear black visors, as do their horses, and their vans have rotating video cameras mounted on top. The government has expressed a desire to eradicate homosexuality, even as an abstract concept, and one can only speculate as to which minority will be the next legislated against. I'm thinking of taking my family and getting out of this country soon, sometime over the next couple years. It's cold and it's mean spirited and I don't like it here anymore.⁴³

V for Vendetta was Moore and Lloyd's extrapolation of what could happen if the stringently conservative government of Margaret 'the Milk Snatcher' Thatcher were combined with the public fear of nuclear war.⁴⁴ The result postulated in the comic was an exceptionally repressive, misogynist, racist, government.

While *V for Vendetta* was an in-depth critique of Thatcher's England, Moore's script was also a mature and nuanced text that used the comic book medium to examine sexual identity. Moore postulated that sexuality and the ability to love are the last bastions of integrity available to a population whose movements and actions are completely monitored and controlled by a totalitarian regime. This is reinforced through the script, in a text-heavy passage one of the characters notes that sex and sexuality can

⁴² Martin Pugh, *Britain Since 1789: A Concise History*, English Edition (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 239–241.

⁴³ Alan Moore, "Introduction," in *V for Vendetta*, Trade Paperback (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 2008), 6.

⁴⁴ Rebecca Smith, "How Margaret Thatcher Became Known as 'Milk Snatcher'," *The Telegraph*, August 8, 2010, sec. Politics, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/7932963/How-Margaret-Thatcher-became-known-as-Milk-Snatcher.html>. During Thatcher's time as England's Education Secretary she reduced government expenditures by removing free milk at school for children over seven.

sell “for so little, but it’s all we have left in this place. It is the very last inch of us... but within that inch we are free.”⁴⁵ Within *V for Vendetta*’s story, loving relationships are considered an act of rebellion against the state and are thus criminal offenses. However, to betray one’s sexuality was not only to forsake one’s integrity, but also, by giving oneself to the state, purposefully exchange freedom for security.⁴⁶ Ruth, a secondary character, willingly betrays her lover Valerie by renouncing their relationship when confronted by the police. In exchange for her betrayal, Ruth is jailed but her life is spared, although Valerie’s is not. Distraught at her act of betrayal Ruth commits suicide, leaving a note whose last words were “[w]hy are they so frightened of us?”⁴⁷

For Moore, Ruth’s rhetorical question was a poignant one for Britons living in the UK in the early 1980s. The British government had long been at odds with British society regarding homosexuality. Governmental appointees found to be homosexuals through an ambiguous ‘vetting test’ were banned from posts abroad. More egregiously, if one failed the ambiguous test one had no way of finding out, although a mark would be made in the individual’s permanent record.⁴⁸ This not only limited an individual’s chances for more gainful employment but also potentially provided the conservative Thatcher government with a list of known homosexuals. News reports of ‘witch hunts’ of homosexuals ran in the *Times* and for some homosexuals there was the very real fear that they would be “corralled into some enclave of the gay ghetto.”⁴⁹ Moore’s exploration of sexuality extended to V, the comic’s protagonist, in particular and the concept of the superhero in

⁴⁵ Alan Moore and David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta*, vol. VI (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 27.

⁴⁶ Alan Moore and David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta*, Trade Paperback (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 2008), 214–215.

⁴⁷ Moore and Lloyd, *V for Vendetta*, 1988, VI:30.

⁴⁸ Peter Hennessy, “Government Firm on Homosexual Ban,” *The Times*, November 18, 1982, sec. Home News, 3.

⁴⁹ Norman Stephenson, “Homosexual Dilemmas,” *The Times*, July 31, 1982, sec. Letters to the Editor, 9.

general. Literature critic Todd Comer noted, “V’s theatricality and playful use of representation connect to a stereotypically gay identity.”⁵⁰ *V for Vendetta* unapologetically questions the über-masculinity of the superhero; the potential homosexuality of V was a major milestone in mainstream comics and flew in the face of comic book conventions of the time. Moore admitted it “seemed sensible... that costumed crime fighting might be a profession,” that attracted a higher percentage of homosexuals, “[b]ut it isn’t all that important, finally, anymore that [a] cab driver is gay.”⁵¹

Moore and Lloyd had started work on *V for Vendetta* in the summer of 1981 and *Warrior* magazine published the first portion in March 1982. Other portions of Moore and Lloyd’s work would appear periodically in *Warrior* through 1985, the year in which the magazine ceased publication altogether, leaving the story of V and a future England under a totalitarian government temporarily unfinished. However, *V for Vendetta* had caught the attention of Jenette Kahn and Len Wein, who subsequently hired Moore to take over writing duties on DC Comics’ *Swamp Thing* series in 1983. And while Moore’s run on *Swamp Thing* introduced the up-and-coming British writer to an American audience, his most influential work and that which launched him to fame was published, like *Dark Knight Returns*, in 1986. *Watchmen*, like *V for Vendetta*, offers a complex narrative, eschews sound effects and thought bubbles, and comments on the fear of a world terrified by potential nuclear war. Indeed, many of the ideas that made *Watchmen* popular with critics and readers were first experimented with in *V for Vendetta*. However, *Watchmen* was different from its predecessor in that it used science fiction and superhero

⁵⁰ Todd A. Comer, “Body Politics: Unearthing an Embodied Ethics in V for Vendetta,” in *Sexual Ideology in the Works of Alan Moore* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 106.

⁵¹ Sharrett, “Alan Moore,” 12–13.

tropes to examine the problems of US society during the 1980s without the “sort of baby-bird school of moralizing where the readers sit with their beaks open as they are force-fed certain predigested morals by the writer” that Moore so despised.⁵²

In order to achieve their goals Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*'s artist, borrowed heavily from a half-century's worth of superhero tropes, applied to them a bleak revisionist aesthetic, and then exploited “the ability for comics to spatially juxtapose (and overlay) past, present, and future moments.”⁵³ The end result is an incredibly complex narrative that focuses on six main characters and a host of ancillary characters; it includes constant temporal shifts, a parallel meta narrative, intricate philosophies, and a critique of the United States' socio-political atmosphere during the last years of the Cold War—all while deconstructing mainstream comics' fifty-year-old love affair with the superhero.

However, the heroes of *Watchmen*, a term to be used loosely, did not leap from onto the pages of the comic straight from Moore's imagination. The much-praised *Watchmen* was initially planned as a reboot of sorts. As Charlton Comics neared the end of its publishing life DC Comics bought the rights to many of its various superheroes. While working on *Swamp Thing* and having heard DC's acquisition of the Charlton rights, Moore pitched the idea of gritty superhero revisionist maxi-series using the old Charlton characters. DC, however, had plans to roll the Charlton characters into their existing superhero universe along with the regular *Superman*, *Batman*, and *Wonder Woman* publications. Giordano, however, liked Moore's concept and instructed him to

⁵² Ibid., 6–7.

⁵³ Joseph L. V. Donica, “‘They Are Trying to Kill Us All’: The Ethics of Urban Space in Post-Disaster Graphic Narrative,” *International Journal of Comic Art* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 340.

create new superheroes.⁵⁴ Thus the world was introduced to the characters of *Watchmen* – Dr. Manhattan, Rorschach, Ozymandias, Nite Owl, The Comedian, and Silk Spectre.

With the exception of Silk Spectre, the characters of *Watchmen* owe a great debt to characters created by Dick Giordano decades earlier while working for Charlton Comics. Captain Atom, appearing first in 1960 (*Super Adventures* #33) was, like Dr. Manhattan, destroyed by a nuclear blast and reassembled at the atomic level. The result of the radiation and subsequent restructuring resulted in each character's superhuman powers. Giordano also created the 'new' Blue Beetle in the 1960s, a "rich guy who uses scientific equipment to follow in the footsteps of an earlier hero of the same name," this same characterization was given to *Watchmen*'s Nite Owl character.⁵⁵ The Question, a violent vigilante clad in a trench coat and fedora, was the basis for *Watchmen*'s Rorschach. Ozymandias, the physically perfect human specimen who spends his life in quiet contemplation was a reinvention of Charlton Comics' less-known character found in the *Peter Cannon... Thunderbolt* series.⁵⁶ And finally there is the connection between The Comedian and Peacemaker, "a man who loves peace so much he is willing to fight for it."⁵⁷ However, unlike the characters of their impetus, the *Watchmen*'s main protagonists are not necessarily superheroes. With the exception of their vigilantism and spandex costumes, *Watchmen*'s 'heroes' were psychologically broken and "ethically ambiguous, or, in some cases, corrupt."⁵⁸ Moore admitted, "I prefer to make my heroes

⁵⁴ Hudsick, "Reassembling the Components in the Correct Sequence," loc. 212–254.

⁵⁵ Ibid., loc. 162–197.

⁵⁶ Richard Bensam, "Obsolete Models a Specialty: An Introduction," in *Minutes to Midnight: Twelve Essays on "Watchmen"*, Kindle (Edwardsville, IL: Sequart Research and Literacy Organization, 2012), loc. 197–212.

⁵⁷ Joe Gill and Pat Boyette, *Peacemaker*, vol. 1 (Derby, CT: Charlton Comics Group, 1967), Cover.

⁵⁸ Di Liddo, *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*, 55.

more ambiguous so that they have got some nasty edges.”⁵⁹ As such none of *Watchmen*’s characters are particularly likeable or heroic.

None of Moore’s protagonists are more unlikable or more characteristic of revisionist superherodom than The Comedian. The Comedian is a pure cynic believing morality to be a joke; literary critic Annalisa Di Liddo describes him as “Captain America had he witnessed the horrors of Vietnam.”⁶⁰ In a narrated flashback Dr. Manhattan describes his first meeting with The Comedian, who was in the employ of the United States government,

I’m in Saigon, being introduced to Edward Blake, The Comedian... Blake is interesting. I have never met anyone so deliberately amoral. He suits the climate here [Vietnam], the madness, the pointless butchery. As I come to understand Vietnam and what it implies about the human condition, I also realize that few humans will permit themselves such an understanding. Blake’s different. He understands perfectly; and he doesn’t care.⁶¹

The Comedian’s moral barometer is non-existent, which allowed the character to commit shocking acts of violence including the sexual assault of a colleague and the murder of a woman who had been carrying his unborn child. However, according to literary critic Peter Sanderson, The Comedian’s amorality combined with his role as an agent of the United States government posed “the question of whether one of the world’s dominant superpower nations may sometimes have to commit an ‘awful, necessary crime’ for the purpose of the greater good.”⁶²

⁵⁹ David Roach et al., “Gary Leach and Alan Moore,” *Hellfire*, 1983, 19.

⁶⁰ Di Liddo, *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*, 55.

⁶¹ Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, “Chapter IV,” in *Watchmen*, Trade Paperback (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 19.

⁶² Peter Sanderson, “Bringing Light to the World: Watchmen from Hiroshima to Manhattan,” in *Minutes to Midnight: Twelve Essays on “Watchmen”*, Kindle (Edwardsville, IL: Sequart Research and Literacy Organization, 2012), loc. 2265.

This philosophical dilemma was historically couched in terms of the Cold War ideology of mutually assured destruction.⁶³ Ultimately, however, Moore's script refused to answer or even comment on the moral quandary posed by the Cold War. In an effort to bring an end to the threat of total nuclear war Ozymandias provided a fabricated extraterrestrial attack that devastated New York City, essentially exchanging hundreds of thousands of lives for hundreds of millions. Moore's script refuses to pass judgment of its own question. Instead the final panel of *Watchmen* offered a single statement, "I leave it entirely in your hands," in an effort to engage readers in what Moore and Gibbons believed to be an imperative philosophical question.⁶⁴

Although the combined elements of Moore's script and Gibbons' artwork were hardly standard fare in any sector of the comic book industry and they certainly pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable in the medium, *Watchmen's* most profound impact on comic books was the way in which it presented its narratives. Largely foreign to the mainstream industry's captive audience were the use of meta-narratives and unannounced temporal shifts. The most prominent meta-narrative, titled "Tales of the Black Freighter," is interspersed throughout *Watchmen's* primary narrative and tells the story of a young sailor who, after being abandoned at sea by pirates, commits "intolerable and unavoidable" acts in an effort to save the town, in so doing the sailor lost his sanity.⁶⁵ The "Black Freighter" narrative was a direct parallel to that of Ozymandias, both of whom

⁶³ Nicholas Thompson, "Nuclear War and Nuclear Fear in the 1970s and 1980s," *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 142–143.

⁶⁴ Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, "Chapter XII," in *Watchmen*, Trade Paperback (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 32.

⁶⁵ Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, "Chapter VIII," in *Watchmen*, Trade Paperback (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 3.

were “driven to increasingly abhorrent acts in an effort to save civilization, culminating in bloody murder in order to... prevent wider carnage.”⁶⁶

Watchmen's meta-narratives are accompanied by, what was likely most foreign to comics' captive audience, unannounced and undifferentiated temporal shifts. There are “flashbacks, and flashbacks within flashbacks,” and “back stories that are literally that, they play out at the rear of the frame.”⁶⁷ Most comics at the time used different color palettes or boxed text relayed by an omniscient narrator to announce that readers were experiencing a different temporal context. Conversely, *Watchmen* eschewed such a paradigm, instead forcing readers to actively connect time and space through the images and text. Moore and Gibbons' work is dedicated to such complex imagery. For the two creators the “most important thing [was] the semiotic substance, the things going on in the background, the meanings and intimations of meaning throughout the book.”⁶⁸ Although Moore's *Watchmen* lacked the high print production values of *Dark Knight Returns* its narrative sophistication raised the bar for all other comics afterward, “making it,” according to literary critic Geoff Klock, “one of the only super-hero comics to deserve the “novel” in “graphic novel.””⁶⁹

In this regard, Moore's script introduced readers to a British writing style that borrowed heavily from a non-comic literary tradition. In Moore's case, the writer combined the tropes of the mainstream American comic books with the influences of James Joyce (*Dubliners*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake*), William S. Burroughs (*The Wild*

⁶⁶ Mary Borsellino, “How the Ghost of You Clings: Watchmen and Music,” in *Minutes to Midnight: Twelve Essays on “Watchmen”*, Kindle (Edwardsville, IL: Sequart Research and Literacy Organization, 2012), loc. 493.

⁶⁷ David Edelstein, “From Page to Screen, ‘Watchmen’ Arrives DOA,” Radio Broadcast, *Fresh Air* (New York: National Public Radio/WHYY, March 6, 2009).

⁶⁸ Sharrett, “Alan Moore,” 18.

⁶⁹ Geoff Klock, “The End Is Nigh: The Limits of Watchmen,” in *Minutes to Midnight: Twelve Essays on “Watchmen”*, Kindle (Edwardsville, IL: Sequart Research and Literacy Organization, 2012), loc. 2610.

Boys: A Book of the Dead and Naked Lunch), and the bleak nihilistic philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche as he had by American comic books.⁷⁰ At the time *Watchmen*'s script was a unique entry in mainstream American comics that deconstructed the distinctly American superhero genre while simultaneously providing the complexity and nuance of literature and philosophy.

The Exodus of Miller and Moore

Watchmen, *V for Vendetta*, and *Dark Knight Returns* were bold steps in the maturation of the medium and provided a much more nuanced view of US society and culture than previous mainstream comic publications. However, the movement of comic books into the realm of an adult medium was still being contested at the end of the decade. On the one hand, despite the success and comparative complexity of *Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen*, and *V for Vendetta* the medium was still considered at worst “junk culture” and at best, a bastard stepchild of “the richer [mediums] of film, television, and opera.”⁷¹ However, the generally low opinion of mainstream comics did little to hinder their overall public acceptance. Batman would go on to receive his first public museum exhibit in 1989 at the Museum of Cartoon in New York City. And while the museum, after several name changes and relocations, has since closed its doors, Batman’s inclusion in a museum that had previously devoted many of its exhibits to comic strips and underground comix is a telling statement about the maturation mainstream of comics.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 2645; Borsellino, “How the Ghost of You Clings: *Watchmen* and Music,” 436; Gene Phillips, “Blotting Out Reality: Questioning Rorschach,” in *Minutes to Midnight: Twelve Essays on “Watchmen”*, Kindle (Edwardsville, IL: Sequart Research and Literacy Organization, 2012), 1231.

⁷¹ Joe Morganstern, “Tim Burton, Batman, and the Joker: The Director Turns His Surrealistic Wit to the Comic Classic,” *New York Times*, April 9, 1989, MC53; Donal Henahan, “A World Gone POW!,” *New York Times*, July 29, 1990, H19.

Similarly, sales of mature titles like *Maus*, *Dark Knight Returns*, and *Watchmen* were strong, with trade paperbacks of the titles selling close to 100,000 copies through 1988—two years after their release as periodicals.⁷² Due to distribution complications hard sales figures for the periodical runs of the *Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* series are difficult to come by. However, DC Comics' overall sales trajectory spiked sharply in 1986, corresponding with the releases of *Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*.⁷³ In that same year, Alan Moore was asked about his future in the comic book industry, to which he replied,

If you would have asked me five years ago to describe my audience, I would have started by placing it between thirteen and eighteen years of age. Now [1988], I'd place it between thirteen and thirty-five or forty. It has expanded a great deal. If we are going to keep that audience, we're going to have to be conscious of their interests, which aren't going to be the same as our captive audience.⁷⁴

Clearly, attitudes and tastes toward mainstream comics were changing. The initial movement toward the maturation of mainstream comics led by Miller, Moore, their collaborators, and editors like Dick Giordano, Janette Kahn, and Karen Berger had been financially and critically successful. However, it also manifested a censorial backlash within the industry that ultimately led to Miller and Moore's departure from DC Comics. While comic readers and critics were responding favorably to the new material being published, the religious right and social conservatives were less enamored by the limited shift toward the medium's maturation. In response to outside pressure, publishers,

⁷² Ames, "Fifty Years of Batman at the Cartoon Museum: The Dark Knight Made Changes over the Years," WC11.

⁷³ Edwin McDowell, "America Is Taking Comic Books Seriously," *New York Times*, July 31, 1988, E7.

⁷³In the late 1980s several distribution companies were shipping mainstream comic books. With no industry standard, each company calculated sales figures differently. With the exception of Diamond Distributors Inc., companies distributing at this time have since closed their doors or halted operations as comic book distributors.

⁷⁴ Sharrett, "Alan Moore," 20.

retailers, and distributors had met without consulting the creators in hopes of creating an internal ratings system. Offended by the attempted censorial measure, Miller, Moore and other creators countered by drafting a petition that was published in *The Comics Buyer's Guide*. The document reads,

To Marvel and DC Comics: It has come to our attention that you intend to introduce new standards of in-house censorship to your comics. These new guidelines were developed without our consultation. You have yet to inform most of the profession of the new conditions under which we are expected to work. We take this opportunity to express our extreme displeasure.⁷⁵

Although DC never implemented an official ratings system for their comics they began printing 'Suggested for Mature Readers' on the covers of their mature comics. "It was no accident" the censors went after DC: after all the company had completely reinvigorated their public image with adult comics. "It's the best work you lose, bringing in any kind of censorship," Miller lamented in a 1988 interview.⁷⁶ And DC did lose; Miller left the company and would not work on another DC comic until 2001, spending the intervening years primarily in the employ of independent publishers. As a parting swipe at DC, Miller lambasted the industry as a whole in an interview conducted by Gary Groth for *The Comics Journal*, "As far as I know, the comics industry has never done a fucking thing for the First Amendment."⁷⁷ Moore, similarly displeased with the situation and attempted censorship, was equally vicious in his condemnation of DC. Moore saw the 'mature readers' label as a violation of the creators' role in the medium and rhetorically suggested, "instead of 'For Mature Readers', DC might like to use the label

⁷⁵ Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, 91–92.

⁷⁶ Gary Groth et al., *Frank Miller: The Interviews 1981-2003*, vol. 2, The Comics Journal Library (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2003), 53.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:51.

‘Full of Tits and Innards.’”⁷⁸ Although Moore’s editor, Karen Berger, fought hard for the writer’s creative freedom, and by proxy the artistic freedom of all DC’s creative staff, the whole ordeal had left a bad taste in the eccentric writer’s mouth.⁷⁹ For a time Moore left mainstream comics altogether and instead opted to work for independent publishers as well as self-publish.

Despite Moore’s assertions of DC’s violation of creator rights, Kahn refused to censor the material or promote an internal ratings system. The company would not, however, concede on printing ‘Suggested for Mature Readers’ on its mature publications. Kahn believed that DC Comics:

had an obligation to stand behind the people who were selling [DC] comics. Our solution was a ratings system where we’d print “Suggested for Mature Readers” on those comics that contained more graphic material. We didn’t want parents, especially those who still thought of comics as a kids’ medium, to be horrified if they said, “Oh, let me pick up some comics for my child,” only to find they were totally inappropriate for an eight-year old. We knew that would cause a firestorm and catapult us back to the early years of the Comics Code. Our goal was to protect retailers and create some kind of buffer between the parent and the material... When we got the letter from the talent with its outcry of censorship, we felt that we’d been misunderstood. We weren’t altering the content to make it more palatable. That *would* have been censorship. We were simply saying this content is mature.⁸⁰

For DC Comics, who had resolved itself to continue to push the boundaries of mainstream comics, it was easier to include a warning on the covers of adult comics than change the minds of those who continued to view the medium as one designed for children. Due to the work of Alan Moore, who had distinguished himself amongst US readers while scripting *Swamp Thing*, *Watchmen*, and eventually *V for Vendetta* (the rights of the latter had been purchased by DC Comics and published in the US just before

⁷⁸ Parkin, *Alan Moore*, 58–59.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁸⁰ Greenberger, “The Path of Kahn,” 29.

Moore left the company), DC's editorial staff began courting British comic creators in hopes of recreating the successes of Moore's titles.

Chapter 4

...American comics were suffering a bit of a malaise, especially at DC—the American writers and artists had basically grown up reading nothing but their own comics, and they weren't able to do much more than reproduce their own comics...¹

- Garth Ennis

1986 was a watershed year for DC Comics, situating the company as a vanguard of the maturation of mainstream comics. Thanks to critical acclaim of DC's comics and their increased acceptance amongst adult readers, due in large part to the changes initiated under Kahn, the company's fortunes began to change. Between 1985 and 1987, distribution and sales of DC's popular titles increased by an impressive 110.1%. Comparatively, Marvel's distribution and sales contracted by 8.4% in the same period of time.² *Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen*, and to a lesser extent *Swamp Thing*, spurred on DC's sales, in turn making their creators famous, at least within the world of comic book fandom. More so than Miller, Alan Moore became associated with a refined and mature, if not somewhat pedantic, literary style—*Watchmen* quoted Nietzsche extensively and *Swamp Thing* often offered poetry as oppose to prose.

As Moore made a name for himself in the States with his *Swamp Thing* and *Watchmen* scripts, he was also directing DC executives and editors towards other British talent toiling away in the UK comics scene. In response, Jenette Kahn along with Dick Giordano and *Swamp Thing* editor Karen Berger began recruiting heavily from British comic anthologies such as *2000 AD* and *Warrior*. Both publications began in the mid-

¹ David Carroll, "Trailblazers: Interviews with Jamie Delano and Garth Ennis," *Bloodsongs*, January 1997, 45.

² United States Postal Service, *Average Total Paid Circulation*, Circulation Record (Washington DC: USPS, October 1, 1985); United States Postal Service, *Average Total Paid Circulation*, Circulation Record (Washington DC: USPS, October 1, 1985); United States Postal Service, *Average Total Paid Circulation*, Circulation Record (Washington DC: USPS, October 5, 1987). The figures above are the average paid circulations for the year as reported by the comics publishers named to the United States Postal Service in accordance with Section 4369 of Title 39 in the United States code.

1970s, *2000 AD* (first issued in 1977) was a weekly publication of comic strips whereas *Warrior* (1973) was a fanzine dedicated, as the publication's subtitle suggested, to "Heroic Tales of Sword and Sorcery." By 1981 *Warrior* had run into financial difficulties and ceased publication before re-launching in 1982. Under the helm of Dez Skinn, the magazine's scope was broadened and its subtitle changed to "Illustrated Tales of Heroic Fantasy – Past, Present and Future," with Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* being one of the magazine's initial and most successful storylines.³ Unfortunately it did not make the publication financially successful and *Warrior* closed its doors permanently in 1985.

Both *Warrior* and the more successful *2000 AD*, the latter of which is still being published today, were part of their own renaissance. Like American comics at the time, British writers and artists publishing in *2000 AD* and *Warrior* were limited in the socio-political content they could portray in their works. However, British creators, unlike many of their American counterparts, "excelled at finding ways to bring out serious issues under a guise seemingly flippant enough to slip past the conservative guardians of public taste."⁴ As *Watchmen* went to press, *2000 AD* was publishing work from new British talent that was proving to be innovative and popular amongst UK comic readerships. After Kahn and Giordano became increasingly aware of a vast comics talent pool in the UK, they contacted Rick Senett, an employee of DC Comic's parent company familiar with up-and-coming comic talent in the UK. Senett arranged a meeting between Kahn, Giordano, and a handful of England's most promising comic book creators in the

³ Ron Holland, "An Interview with Dez Skinn: Warrior," *Journal of the Society of Strip Illustration*, November 1981, 3–6.

⁴ Ben Little, "2000AD: Understanding the 'British Invasion' of American Comics," in *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures: Essays on the Interplay of Media, Disciplines, and International Perspectives*, ed. Mark Berninger (McFarland & Co., 2010), 143.

posh Savoy hotel. This first meeting was an elaborate meet-and-greet between British working-class comics creators and low-key DC staff that resulted in very little. However, as Karen Berger became an integral member of DC's British scouting missions, these missions became more successful. On a second trip Kahn, Giordano, and Berger hosted the meeting at a local bar, which proved to be more amicable for DC's restrained staff and working-class British creators.⁵

After the three DC staffers returned from their scouting trip Berger presented Kahn with an extensive report detailing, "everybody [they] had seen with samples of all their work and personal recommendations."⁶ Of the writers with which Kahn was presented, the work of Jamie Delano, Grant Morrison, Neil Gaiman, and Peter Milligan, all of whom had made their mark in either *Warrior* or *2000 AD*, were the most impressive and marketable in American comics; DC Comics subsequently hired each writer to take on different projects. Spurred on by Kahn, Giordano, Berger, and other DC editors, the works of the newly hired British writers were, at least in certain respects, unique for their time. The influx of British writers came from politically liberal working class backgrounds and had consumed superhero comics as children and adolescents. Thus, on the one hand, the American comics of these British creators retained the fantastical elements for which the medium had become famous. On the other hand, scripts reflected their class and political affiliations as well as a literary tradition, all of which were manifested though nuanced subversive critiques of culture, society, and politics as well as narrative styles uncommon in mainstream comics at the time. Furthermore, from the indomitable hyper-moral Superman of the 1940s to the crookedly

⁵ Greenberger, "The Path of Kahn," 30.

⁶ Ibid.

amoral Comedian of *Watchmen*, each successful generation of comic creators has always redefined or, at the very least, refined the American superhero; the working-class Brits employed at DC in the late 1980s were no different. As each writer was given control over a particular series they also took the opportunity to re-conceptualize the superhero for US comic readers.

“Good evening London... this is the voice of fate...”⁷

Jamie Delano grew up in working-class Northampton and came up in the same circles as Alan Moore but never imagined himself as a comic book scriptwriter. Indeed, although Delano had picked up comics from time to time, the writer admitted “a little shame-faced, perhaps, that [he was] far from a dedicated consumer of the medium.”⁸ Instead Delano spent his early twenties smoking hashish, occasionally dealing on the grey market, and working ‘dust-jacket’ jobs—bookstore cashier, short-order cook, and taxi driver.⁹ At twenty-nine Delano entered comics later than his contemporaries and, like all of the British invaders, began his career in the UK comics scene. The writer’s biggest pre-DC Comics success was several *Captain Britain* scripts for Marvel UK, although he also crafted several one-off stories for *2000 AD*.¹⁰ Even as Delano gained notoriety within the comic industry he rarely consumed the medium and insisted that:

Not having a background in comics “fandom” has probably been more of an advantage to me than otherwise. There is a distinct whiff of incest pervading sections of the medium that I have occasionally found distasteful—inevitable, to some degree, in any [medium], I guess, but in

⁷ Alan Moore and David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta*, vol. I, US (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 2.

⁸ Jamie Delano, Jamie Delano Interview (Part I & II), by Drasko Roganovic, October 29, 2009, cultofghoul.blogspot.com.

⁹ Deconstructing Comics, *Jamie Delano: The Accidental Writer*, February 28, 2011, deconstructing-comics.com.

¹⁰ Ibid. “Blood Sport,” “The Ark,” “The Ship that liked to Dance,” and “Fair’s Fare” were Delano’s pre-DC Comics *2000 AD* works that brought him to the attention of Khan and Berger.

comics this is often suggestive of lack of experience of the wider world, rather than a selective devotion to the strictures of a particular art-form.¹¹

Delano's rejection of the medium's self-cannibalism was, at least in part, the reason for the author's uncommon comic scripts and subsequent recognition by Jenette Kahn and Karen Berger. DC Comics green lit Delano's first American comic book, *John Constantine: Hellblazer*, initially illustrated by John Ridgway, which arrived on store shelves in January 1988. Despite Delano's condemnation of the medium's insular mentality, *Hellblazer's* main character, John Constantine was initially the creation of Alan Moore and first appeared in a 1985 issue of *Swamp Thing*.¹² Alan Moore imagined Constantine as a "blue-collar warlock. Somebody who was streetwise, working class, and from a different background than the standard run of comic book mystics."¹³ Moore's character, though popular with readers, was ultimately an ancillary character in the *Swamp Thing* comics. Delano's *Hellblazer* scripts, however, fleshed out and expanded the character's persona. For Delano, John Constantine was:

a wannabe rational, calm, English family guy constantly undermined by intrinsic psychopathy. An irritating, arrogant, rash, self-destructive but invulnerable gambler with the souls of others, saved only by the grace of his own savagely ironic self-deprecation. A thrill-seeking fear junkie, prepared to sacrifice all to feed his sick addiction. A devious creep with a lust for tragedy... a parasite who sucks up suffering, then gorged, takes his guilty pleasure in the aftermath.¹⁴

With Moore responsible for the character's creation and Delano for the popularization, the two writers amicably split writer/creator royalties on the John Constantine character,

¹¹ Delano, Jamie Delano Interview (Part I & II).

¹² Alan Moore, Rick Veitch, John Titleben, *The Saga of the Swamp Thing*, vol. #37 (New York: DC Comics, June 1985).

¹³ Alan Moore, "The Unexplored Medium," *Wizard Magazine*, November 1993, 28.

¹⁴ Delano, Jamie Delano Interview (Part I & II).

50/50.¹⁵ Under Delano, John Constantine, a juxtaposition of villainy and virtue, a cynical blue collar Brit and occasional sociopath with a heart of gold, became a prime example of the comic book anti-hero. Even more than previous revisionist heroes, some comic readers were put off. Initially readers condemned Constantine's lack of heroic action. Constantine's "passivity throughout the story is disturbing... I'm disappointed in [him] playing voyeur at the scene of a tragedy," lamented one reader. Another reader directly called into question Constantine's heroic credibility, calling his voyeurism an act of cowardice.¹⁶

Firmly rooted in the horror genre *Hellblazer's* protagonist had a "constant jones for the most sordid and painful of human experience."¹⁷ The story took place in the 'real' world of the late 1980s, mostly in Britain but with a short excursion to the United States. *Hellblazer* combined tropes of the horror genre—elementals, angels, demons, voodoo, and the occult—a departure for Delano, who was "never really... a true aficionado of the horror genre." Though, he admitted "it has become apparent over the years that [his] creative imagination has a tendency towards exploration of the darker side of human experience."¹⁸

1988, the same year in which *Hellblazer* debuted, so too did *Animal Man*, a series authored by Grant Morrison, a native of Glasgow. Morrison grew up in a fairly poor part of Glasgow with his father, Walter, a WWII veteran-turned-pacifist and his mother.

¹⁵ Jamie Delano, Interview: Jamie Delano on Necropolis, by Glenn Hauman, January 30, 2008, www.comicmix.com/news/.

¹⁶ Charles Hatfield, "Voices from Beyond (Hatfield Letter)," in *John Constantine: Hellblazer #8*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 25; Emiliano Felibert, "Voices from Beyond (Felibert Letter)," in *John Constantine: Hellblazer #8*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 26.

¹⁷ Jamie Delano, To Live Outside the Law you Must Be Honest, Interview by Barb Lien-Cooper, December 2001, sequentialart.com.

¹⁸ Jamie Delano, Interview Corner #84: Jamie Delano, by Comicdom, March 13, 2012, www.comicdom.gr/2012/03/13.

Walter Morrison was a political man, an ardent anti-nuclear activist dedicated to nuclear disarmament who made “nightmare brochures, y’know, pictures of cities burned out and screaming skeletons and nuclear fallout.”¹⁹ Family members supported the young Morrison’s love of comics. His mother was a fan of science fiction and encouraged her son’s consumption of the medium. Likewise, Morrison’s uncle, for whom the writer had great respect, was a reader of 1960s comics and counter culture literature with an extensive personal library of materials to which Morrison had access. Morrison continued to read comics through his adolescence, young adulthood, and into the beginning of his work in the medium during the early 1980s. While he was making him some money, he “wasn’t putting an awful lot of effort into them [the comics],” believing instead that his music career would be his claim to fame.²⁰

However, Morrison’s music career never materialized and the writer turned to comics full-time to make a living, developing an anti-revisionist theme that was born, like the major themes of many of the other British invaders, in the small but respected British comics scene. Before coming to the US, Morrison, like most of his British contemporaries, was reading and publishing his work in *Warrior* and *2000 AD*. And like so many of the first wave of British writers at DC, Alan Moore influenced Morrison’s work. Although Morrison and Moore would eventually come to a public feud, Morrison viewed Moore’s work in the British comic anthology magazines as “sensible” and “forward-looking,” and admitted that *V for Vendetta* was in part responsible for his own full-time work in the medium.²¹

¹⁹ Patrick Meaney, *Grant Morrison: Talking with Gods*, DVD, Documentary (Sequart.org, 2010).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Mark Salisbury, “Grant Morrison (Interview #1),” in *Writers on Comic Script Writing* (London: Titan Books, 1999), 205–206.

Originally pitched as a four-issue miniseries and not a monthly publication, *Animal Man* was Morrison's first American comic series. The first four issues of *Animal Man* were very much in line with the revisionist superheroes popularized by Moore and Miller in 1986, and to some extent anti-hero John Constantine of *Hellblazer* earlier in 1988, although with key differences. Bernhard Baker, the protagonist of *Animal Man*, was in many ways an aesthetic archetype of the quintessential American superhero—lantern-jawed, handsome, fit, clad in spandex—complete with a Superman-esque backstory of having grown up a farm boy in the rural Midwest.²² Lacking the violence and gritty aesthetic of earlier revisionist works *Animal Man* was a peculiar work of the British Invasion of comics, combining recently adopted revisionist conventions of placing superheroes in the context of the real world with plot and aesthetic elements reminiscent of the Gold and Silver Ages of comics.²³ This anomalous combination of elements made *Animal Man* the only title of the British Invasion not to fall under the purview of the “Suggested for Mature Readers” warning label. Unsurprising considering Morrison crafted his scripts by posing the question “Why does blood and torture and anguish excite us? We [creators and readers] thought that by making your [superheroes’] world more violent, we would make it more “realistic,” more “adult.” God help us if that’s what it means. Maybe, for once, we could try to be kind.”²⁴ Regardless of it not being labeled a mature title, the first four issues proved to be popular amongst readers and Morrison was asked to continue his writing duties on *Animal Man*.

²² Grant Morrison and Chris Truog, *Animal Man*, vol. #1 (New York: DC Comics, 1988).

²³ Marc Singer, *Grant Morrison: Combining the Worlds of Contemporary Comics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 53.

²⁴ Grant Morrison and Chris Truog, *Animal Man #26*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1990), 18–19.

Morrison agreed and in doing so was given more creative freedom from Berger who was the title's editor. Morrison responded by drastically turning away from the revisionist school of comic script writing, specifically the anti-hero characterizations that had become so common. "At one point," Morrison recalled in a 1995 interview with *The Comics Journal*, "there was a sense that we were all marching into the future together waving the same [revisionist] flag... I really felt the need to get out from under [that] shadow, because it had become so oppressive..."²⁵ Though Morrison rejected revisionist superheroes, he did not foster a strict adherence to their Silver Age counterparts, and gently poked fun at the impracticality of wearing of spandex.²⁶ Ironically and despite Morrison's distaste for superhero revisionism, the writer's best selling pre-Vertigo comic was the revisionist *Arkham Asylum: a Serious House on Serious Earth*, a Batman comic published in 1989.

Written by Morrison and illustrated by the immensely talented and versatile Dave McKean, *Arkham Asylum* is perhaps the most revisionist of the late 1980s Batman comics. Arkham Asylum, the madhouse in which Batman's most famous villains are incarcerated, is a notorious setting in the *Batman* universe. In Morrison and McKean's work, a 120 page trade paperback, the inmates have, quite literally, taken over the asylum and Batman, the ever vigilant hero, is sent in to rectify the situation. Batman, however, is forced to spend a single night amongst those whom he has captured over the years. Throughout the book Batman is increasingly faced with his own psychosis and sexuality as he attempts to rescue Ruth Adams and Dr. Charles Cavendish, two employees who

²⁵ Nick Hasted, "Interview: Grant Morrison," *The Comics Journal*, April 1995, 59.

²⁶ Ibid.

opted to stay so as to “not leave the asylum in the hands of... of madmen!”²⁷ Ultimately, Batman survives his ordeal in the asylum but not without first being characterized as a “poor sick creature...”²⁸ Continuing and expanding on revisionist narrative motifs, *Arkham Asylum* erased the small and tenuous fissure between hero and villain—Batman, like the story’s villains, belonged in the asylum.

The narrative of *Arkham Asylum* was very much in the revisionist style, and while Morrison later claimed it was a critique of such a style, the proposal for the comic and the script accompanying it was drafted several years earlier when Morrison was, to a degree, emulating Alan Moore.²⁹ Whether it was Batman’s questionable sanity, the sexual deviance of the book’s villains, or the interplay between hero and villain, *Arkham Asylum* was never meant to be in the hands of young comic readers. Far from a heroic archetype, Batman’s status as ‘good’ was questioned repeatedly. Conversely, the incurable madness of the book’s villains, couched in absolute and disturbing terms, was not represented as traditional comic book antagonists but villains that existed in the real world—rapists, pedophiles, murderers, etc. The fact that Morrison had taken the revisionist style one step further led some critics to claim that Morrison had written the most “pretentious Batman book ever.”³⁰ Morrison’s radically different take on a distinctly American character along with the thick narrative, unorthodox art style, and heavy handedness of the final product did not dampen its sales.³¹ Quite the opposite, by 2004 the title had gone on to sell over

²⁷ Grant Morrison and Dave McKean, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (New York: DC Comics, 1989), 32.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁹ Singer, *Grant Morrison*, 65.

³⁰ Hasted, “Interview: Grant Morrison,” 67.

³¹ Grant Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville can Teach us About Being Human* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011), 225–228.

500,000 copies, making it the “best-selling original graphic novel” in the history of American superhero comics.³²

1989 also saw the debut of Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman*, one of DC/Vertigo’s largest titles in both sales and breadth, eventually producing myriad spinoffs focusing on the title’s major and minor characters. Born in the apartment over his father’s grocery store in Portchester and growing up in Sussex, Neil Gaiman was introduced to reading at a young age by his parents. He quickly fell in love with the fantasy books of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. At seven years old Gaiman was given a cardboard box full of comics including *The Mighty Thor* and *Justice League of America #47*. These two titles are exceptionally important in the development of Gaiman as a writer of both comics and prose. *The Mighty Thor* introduced the young Gaiman to mythology, which permeated nearly all of his comic scripts and many of his prose works such as *American Gods* and *Smoke and Mirrors: Short Fictions and Illusions*. *The Justice League of America #47*, however, introduced the future scribe to his most recognized character—Sandman. Gaiman decided at age eleven to become a comic writer but was crushed when a school guidance counselor recommended accounting instead.³³

Shattered by the lack of encouragement, Gaiman gave up comics for nearly a decade. Instead he began freelance writing for various magazines, including *Penthouse* and *Knave*, although his articles were rarely sexual in nature. It wasn’t until waiting for a train at London’s Victoria Station that Gaiman once again fell in love with comics when picking up an issue of Alan Moore and Stephen Bissette’s *Swamp Thing #28*, a process he described as “like returning to an old flame and discovering that she was still

³² Karen Berger, “Afterword,” in *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, 2nd ed. (New York: DC Comics, 2004), 129.

³³ Hy Bender, *The Sandman Companion* (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1999), 12–13.

beautiful.”³⁴ After contacting then DC Comics editor Dick Giordano, Gaiman and Dave McKean were slated to write and illustrate *Black Orchid*, a three-issue mini-series based on a much older and nearly forgotten DC superheroine. However, there was the prevailing sentiment at the time that two obscure British creators, writing about an equally obscure superhero, who was indeed a woman, was a financial mistake; female leads were considered to be financially unviable. McKean, who had illustrated *Black Orchid*, was put in charge of the previously mentioned *Arkham Asylum*, *Black Orchid* was shelved for several months until the two Brits were better recognized in the industry. In the meantime Gaiman was given his own monthly title of an obscure character called Sandman.³⁵

In 1989 Gaiman was an untested writer in the US comics industry and Sandman was a twice-failed character that had never gained popularity. However, Gaiman’s version of the hero was nothing like either of the previous iterations or anything else in mainstream comics for that matter,

When DC gave me [Gaiman] a monthly comic to write, one of the first things I had to deal with was knowing I don’t have what it takes to do super-hero stories, even though that’s what the majority of comics buyers like to read.... On the other hand I *can* write science fiction, fantasy, and horror. So I decided to cheat my way through... instead of writing about humans acting as gods, why not write about gods?³⁶

Sandman’s main character, Dream, was a far cry from mainstream superheroes. Pale, emaciated, and sad, the character looked more like a front man for a Cure cover band than the muscle-bound cape and spandex superhero that had proven popular since the

³⁴ Ibid., 17.

³⁵ Ibid., 22–23. Although DC Comics’ plan was to sit on *Black Orchid* for eighteen months, letting *Arkham Asylum* garner a reputation in the meantime, they decided to publish Gaiman and McKean’s *Black Orchid* before the *Arkham Asylum* went to press.

³⁶ Ibid., 233.

medium's entrance into the mass market. Although Gaiman's *Sandman* was created at the height of superhero revisionism, Dream lacked almost every characteristic of his compatriots' heroic protagonists. Instead, Dream is an introspective being; perhaps a bit of a mope that has been as equally associated with the Goth sub-culture as mainstream comic books.³⁷ Rarely bogged down by emotions, Dream was a hyper logical character whose moral code was so unflappable that he willingly beheaded his own son as to not stray from his personal value system.³⁸

In July 1990, a year after the debut of *Sandman*, Peter Milligan, a Londoner, began his own American comic book career when *Shade: the Changing Man* began appearing in comic book stores. Less is known about Milligan's youth years than Gaiman and Morrison. Perhaps this is unsurprising from a creator valuing three rules when it comes to being a comics writer, "learn how to hold your drink, don't piss on the carpets, and assume an air of mystery."³⁹ The tidbits of information that Milligan has, on occasion, let slip through are somewhat mysterious in their own right. Milligan did not grow up reading comics and was more interested in fine art than writing. Milligan cites specifically the French poet Arthur Rimbaud and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* as major influences in his work. Even one of the villains, the Face, in *Shade: the Changing Man* was based on Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.⁴⁰ Milligan also has had a lifelong obsession with the two-millennia-old Greek mythologies.⁴¹

³⁷ Ibid., 10–11.

³⁸ Neil Gaiman and Mike Dringenberg, *Sandman #9*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1989), 9–17; Neil Gaiman, Stan Woch, and Dick Giordano, *Sandman #29*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 2–7.

³⁹ Peter Milligan, *On the Dark Side with Peter Milligan*, by Jeffrey Haas, accessed October 9, 2012, www.theouthouser.com.

⁴⁰ Peter Milligan, *Skreemer to X-Statix*, by Marissa Guidara, September 2002, www.sequentialart.com.

⁴¹ Jeffrey Renaud, "Peter Milligan Walks on 'Greek Street'," *Comic Book Resources*, November 24, 2009, www.comicbookresources.com.

Before entering comic books Milligan was attending art school where he found that he “was writing and not drawing and not painting.” “I was writing a lot,” Milligan recounted in a 2002 interview, “but I was... in the visual world. I met some people who were becoming comic artists. And it seemed to me the perfect marriage because I was at art school, but I was writing. And comics seemed to be potentially such an incredible thing—*words* and *pictures*.”⁴² In that same interview Milligan continued this thought, extolling the virtues of combining words and pictures,

Well, I mean, I've always thought that it doesn't have to be limited. *You're talking about words and pictures*, and if you forget superheroes, and if you forget the past of what comics are supposed to be—like kids and everything else—you're talking about words and pictures. If James Joyce and Pablo Picasso got together and did a comic, it wouldn't be juvenile. But, they would still have to use *words* and *pictures*. And it seems to me—there still is that potential. So that's what excites me about it.⁴³

Milligan’s specific mention of James Joyce is apt, especially when applied to *Shade: the Changing Man*, a complexly written non-linear narrative with constantly shifting temporal, political, and social contexts.

Shade is the story of Rac Shade and his/her (the character’s gender changes several times) attempt to save America from its own past as well as its future. Shade, along with his/her two companions, Lenny and Kathy, travel the United States attempting to remedy the madness of American past and future as they appear. Throughout the series Shade and his companions are constantly placed in confrontations with their own inescapable pasts as well as the inescapable past of the United States. The road-movie styled narrative of the plot harkens back to an American literary tradition of wanderlust

⁴² Peter Milligan, An Interview with Peter Milligan (Part 2), by Sheckley, 2002, <http://sheckley.tripod.com/Milligan/interview2.htm>.

⁴³ Ibid.

popularized in Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*.⁴⁴ Milligan prepared for *Shade* by undertaking his own American road odyssey,

[B]efore I started writing the book, I traveled across America, because I wanted to get a more personal take on bits of America that never hit the news. So I Greyhounded it across and took some planes and ended up on the West Coast. That was a real eye-opener. I don't think actual incidents found their way into "Shade," but some kind of quality and some kind of feel did. And perhaps some kinds of places and situations in some skewered way found their way into the book.⁴⁵

Shade: the Changing Man was Milligan's deeply personal outsider view of the United States and a means for the author to "work out some of [his] thoughts about America through this most American of mediums—comic books."⁴⁶ Part sci-fi acid-trip and part road movie, *Shade*'s narrative was, despite Milligan's Britishness, always told in an American context. In a 2009 interview, Milligan revealed that the British writers were "drenched in American culture. Which is both good and bad..."⁴⁷

Politicization in the Panels

Milligan's assertion that the British comic creators were mired in American culture fell in line with the analysis of historians Richard H. Pells and John Dumbrell. The British-American relationship is, at least partially, characterized by "a shared language and colonial history." However, the Anglo-American cultural relationship "grew even closer with the political convergence that occurred during the 1980s under the stewardships of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan."⁴⁸ The Brits, along with their

⁴⁴ Brian Ireland, "Errand into the Wildreness: The Cursed Earth as Apocalyptic Road Narrative," *Journal of American Studies* 43, no. 3 (2009): 497.

⁴⁵ Peter Milligan, Peter Milligan Revisits "Shade", by Jeffrey Renaud, November 25, 2009, www.comicbookresources.com.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations in the Cold War and After* (New York: Macmillan, 2001), 89; Richard H. Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997), xv. Currently

revisionist predecessors (Miller and Moore), offered more than just a stylistic shift in the medium's portrayal of heroes and villains. Morrison, Delano, and Milligan used the medium to advance their own socio-political ideologies or critique conservative aspects of Anglo-American society. The scripts of Delano's *Hellblazer*, Morrison's *Animal Man* and Milligan's *Shade: the Changing Man* were, at least compared to other mainstream comics, extensively more complex and nuanced.

Delano's work on *Hellblazer*, while popular with fans and critics, did not drastically change the ways in which comic books presented their narratives to the reader. Instead the author used the horror genre not to shock or frighten consumers but to further a political agenda. For Delano, the *Hellblazer* books were means of "commenting on 1980s Britain. That was where I was living," Delano stated in a 1997 interview, "it was shit, and I wanted to tell everybody."⁴⁹ Indeed, of these four creators, Delano was the only author not to place the narrative primarily in the United States. Social and cultural critiques in *Hellblazer* were aimed at Britain in general and Thatcherism in particular, however, Delano managed to reach American audiences with his anti-conservative political posturing, which were manifested early in the series.

Hellblazer #3 is perhaps Delano's most overt critique of conservative politics. The title page of the issue shows a man who had recently lost all his money lying dead on the ground. There is a poster hanging on a public street saying in bold letters "Vote Conservative on June 11th. We'll put the Pound back in your Pocket," however, the

John Dumbrell is a professor of Government and International Affairs at Durham University while Richard H. Pells is professor emeritus of 20th Century American history at University of Texas at Austin.

⁴⁹ Carroll, "Trailblazers."

graffiti scrawled underneath the statement reads “By taking it out of mine.”⁵⁰ On the following page John Constantine, walking the streets of London on Election Day, relays Delano’s sentiments of Anglo-American conservatism through internal dialogue that read,

Inner London, June 11th, 1987. Election Day. Down here there is a despair in the air you have to breathe to understand. Poverty plucks at your sleeve with broken fingernails... hunger flashes its teeth from the shadows... and defeat lays in the gutter, waiting for the garbage truck. This is where the abandoned people live. All part of the great British “return to Victorian Values” I guess.⁵¹

As the issue presses on, Constantine finds himself captured and forced to watch election coverage and a subsequent speech by Margaret Thatcher containing standard conservative fare regarding trickle-down economics as well as the free market and capitalism as a guide to growth, opportunity, and strength. Delano lifted some of his dialogue directly from a speech given by Thatcher following her election to Prime Minister for a third term.⁵²

Throughout the remaining pages of *Hellblazer* #3, Delano’s anti-conservative commentary possesses all the subtlety of a car crash. “Damned to the “help yourself society”— where the strong help themselves to whatever they want, and the weak are left to help themselves” to whatever is left, is Constantine’s retort to the Thatcher speech. In the same issue Delano portrays junior commodity dealers as corpulent pig-snouted demons and again uses Constantine’s voice to give weight to his political ideologies: “profit [was] definitely the top god of the eighties—for monetarism, read Satanism.”⁵³

⁵⁰ Jamie Delano and John Ridgway, *John Constantine: Hellblazer* #3, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1:5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1:20; Margaret Thatcher, Speech on being re-elected MP for Finchley, Hendon Town Hall, The Burroughs, London NW4, June 12, 1987, Thatcher Archive: General Election Compilation.

⁵³ Delano and Ridgway, *John Constantine: Hellblazer* #3, 1:14.

Two issues later, in *Hellblazer* #5, Delano scripted his only narrative to appear in the United States and, unsurprisingly given the author's predilection for attacking conservatism, couched his anti-war and anti-evangelical sentiments within the context of post-Vietnam War America. The story, titled "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," highlights the violence of war and its effects on the individual soldier; the story's main antagonist, Ross, suffers from violent bouts of post-traumatic stress disorder and an unfounded fear that "throbs like a boil which can only be lanced by violence."⁵⁴ However, Delano also alludes to how the horrors of the Vietnam War affected the entire nation; Ross was the only young man from Independence, Iowa (the town in which the story takes place) to return from the jungles of Vietnam alive. The people of the small town are so distraught at having lost an entire generation of their children and grandchildren as well as their reproductive and labor capabilities that they seek consolation in the arms of a televangelist who, through lies and general skullduggery, relieves the town of its wealth by requesting donations in exchange for a miracle—which in the context of *Hellblazer's* horror genre roots, is to reanimate the corpses of the long dead soldiers. Delano would continue to offer critiques on what he viewed as the inequity caused by financially and socially conservative political leadership.

However, of the initial batch of British invaders, Morrison was the most overt in vocalizing his socio-political ideology using the *Animal Man* series to champion animal rights, vegetarianism, and environmentalism. The basis of the views expressed in *Animal Man* came from Morrison's belief that,

Humans tend to place a very high value on human life, in some cases, and very little value on human life in some other cases, so our imagined

⁵⁴ Jamie Delano and John Ridgway, *John Constantine: Hellblazer* #5, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 10.

special position in nature, like our morality, is suspect, inconsistent and open to constant revision depending on how we feel on any given day. As I said in *Animal Man*, at least rats don't foul their environment or build weapons of mass destruction, then make excuses about why they did it. Does shitting in our own nest really make humankind superior to other animals...? We're told to look out for cruelty to animals as one of the first indications of a sociopathic or psychopathic personality, so the scientists who perform this work then go all wide-eyed and refuse to recognize how they might be coming across to right-thinking folks, are either very naive or in denial.⁵⁵

While Morrison's scripts manifested this social philosophy throughout the writer's twenty-six-issue run on the series, the most prominent instances take place in *Animal Man* #3-5 and #26. In a series of touching panels illustrated by Chris Truog and Doug Hazelwood, a character called The Beast, the villain in the series' first story arc, is shown cradling a dying ape in his arms, an image that set up the story arc's conclusion.⁵⁶

Following a battle between Animal Man and The Beast, Morrison uses the latter's last words to give voice to a rather macabre neo-primitivism ideology,

The world's so...empty...without them [animals]. We should never have [left] the forest. Don't you understand? They're digging a grave for the world – and there's no one to stop them – no one... We were given paradise and we turned it into an *abattoir* [slaughterhouse]. Everywhere we go we leave things bleeding and screaming – and we're murdering the world. We have to be stopped – mankind has to be stopped before there's nothing left.⁵⁷

Morrison continues to build Animal Man's affinity for animals in the issue following the above quote, *Animal Man* #5. In the issue Baker discarded all of the meat from the refrigerator, much to the consternation of his wife, Ellen, and the disgust of his son, Cliff, who is told that he will be eating tofu in lieu of meat.⁵⁸ In a later issue Baker caught Cliff

⁵⁵ Grant Morrison, "Disney With Fangs" - Morrison on We3, by Matt Brady, September 9, 2007, www.newsarama.com/pages/DC/We3.htm.

⁵⁶ Grant Morrison and Chris Truog, *Animal Man* #3, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 1; 22.

⁵⁷ Grant Morrison and Chris Truog, *Animal Man* #4, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 16–17.

⁵⁸ Grant Morrison and Chris Truog, *Animal Man* #5, vol. 1, Holiday Issue (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 6–8.

clandestinely consuming a burger and proceeded to lecture him on the dangers of eating meat. Through dialogue Morrison explained the relationship between meat consumption, crowded slaughterhouses, the clearing of the rainforest, and the subsequent link to global climate change.⁵⁹

Morrison was at his most overt in his final issue of the series, *Animal Man #26*, wherein the writer broke the fourth wall and deployed meta-messaging to further his animal rights agenda.⁶⁰ In issue twenty-six both narrative mechanisms are deployed to facilitate the author's philosophy. First Morrison uses meta-messaging by directly engaging Buddy Baker as his creator and informed his creations that "you only care about animals because *I* wanted to use you to draw people's attention to what's happening in the world." Next, and foregoing any pretext at subtlety, Morrison addressed the reader directly. "Before I go," Morrison told the reader, "I'd urge *anyone* who cares about animal abuse to join *PETA*, who are involved in active, non-violent campaigns on behalf of animals. That's People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, P.O. Box 42516, Washington, D.C. 20015. Okay?"⁶¹ Morrison extends his overt critique,

In my world, in the real world, I can't do anything about the things that upset me. All I can do is join protest groups and write this comic... I could talk about it for a hundred pages – two hundred – but in the end it all boils down to three words. Might makes right. Man is able to abuse and slaughter and experiment on animals simply because he's stronger than

⁵⁹ Grant Morrison and Chris Truog, *Animal Man #17*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1989), 9–10.

⁶⁰ Brian Cronin, "Meta-Messages: Grant Morrison Meets Animal-Man," *Comic Book Resources*, October 31, 2011, goodcomics.comicbookresources.com. The fourth wall traditionally refers to the 'invisible' or 'glass' wall in stage performances through which the audience views a play. Breaking that wall involves direct engagement with the audience. The same general concept applies to comic books—the two dimensional panel is the stage-set while the empty space between the reader's eyes and the comic are the fourth wall. EC Comics frequently used this narrative style between 1950 and 1954, almost every story ended with a heavy-handed monologue written in the second-person. Breaking the fourth wall has been in regular use for nearly sixty years. Meta-messaging, a slightly subtler technique, is the process in which a comic creator comments or references another comic or creator in their own work.

⁶¹ Morrison and Truog, *Animal Man #26*, 1:13; 17.

they are. Other than that, there's no moral ground on which to justify any animal exploitation.⁶²

Morrison successfully combined superhero comics and advanced storytelling techniques in mainstream comics; and while this was not wholly new in the world of comics, the very structure of the medium encouraged the interplay between words, pictures, and space. Critic and scholar Matthew Pustz rightly posits *Animal Man*'s meta-messaging to be familiar territory for readers of contemporary metafiction.⁶³ This is quite possibly the case; however, Morrison's extensive use of meta-fictional styles was new in mainstream comics in general and superhero comics in particular and attracted adult readers more familiar with contemporary metafiction to the comic book medium. Morrison's contribution to the maturation of the medium, at least in regards to *Animal Man*, was the use of meta-messaging, which "threw... readers for a loop... combining pop culture, with religion, philosophy, and very heartfelt questions of life and existence."⁶⁴ For Morrison, the goal was to use the comics medium to "break the rules of physics and time and space and life and death..."⁶⁵ Morrison's method of storytelling not only impressed adult readers but pushed them to think about much larger philosophical questions long after the comic had been read and put down.⁶⁶

Like Delano and Morrison, Peter Milligan's work on *Shade: the Changing Man* was highly political. Milligan made it a point to critique the United States' history and

⁶² Ibid., 1:13.

⁶³ Matthew J. Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 127–129. This monograph was received with mixed results. On the one hand Pustz's examination is limited to a handful of Mid-West comic retailers. That the author did not collect data from popular comic book conventions, large chain book retailers, and limited the scope to the Mid-West United States indicates a very limited engagement with comic book culture.

⁶⁴ Mark Lucas, "Animal Writes (Lucas Letter)," in *Animal Man #22*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1990), 25.

⁶⁵ Meaney, *Grant Morrison*.

⁶⁶ Malcom Bourne, "Animal Writes (Bourne Letter)," in *Animal Man #22*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1990), 25.

thus the very foundations of American national memory. Following the first issue's introduction of the main character, Shade, Milligan and artist Chris Bachalo immediately began offering such critiques. In one of his early scripts Milligan's examined what is perhaps the United States' most prominent mystery—the assassination of John F. Kennedy—which the writer used to levy criticism on the US doctrine of global economic superiority. The script postulated that the mob and C.I.A. “are just the high priests, the guardians of America's divinity... which is green and comes with a picture of Mr. Washington on one side and the words “In God We Trust” on the other...”⁶⁷ Using *Shade* as his vehicle, Milligan and the talented art team pulled back the mask of American exceptionalism and revealed a rather schizophrenic national personality that had been constructed through various historical myths and cultural beliefs. In Milligan's scripts, America as well as its culture and identity are an amalgam of pop culture, conscious national mythologizing, and a subconscious domestic madness.

Milligan combined these aspects into a recurring antagonist called ‘The American Scream’ in the series' fourth issue. As its name might suggest, American Scream operated as a conceptual antithesis to the notion of the ‘American Dream’. Illustrated as a skeletal Uncle Sam in its first appearance, American Scream would take on equally ‘American’ characterizations such as a Southern antebellum plantation owner and Wild West gun fighter. Regardless of the particular aesthetic ascribed to the American Scream character, the persona consistently embodied Milligan's vision of the madness of an American culture “ready to burst. All that twisted, exaggerated, mutated, bent and crippled America just waiting to explode... an idea of America, seen from a long way

⁶⁷ Peter Milligan and Chris Bachalo, *Shade: The Changing Man #3*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1990), 19.

off, from another planet. It's an idea of a country, which is itself an idea.... A country of disparate groups and races and ideals and insanities pretending to be bound together by an idea called America."⁶⁸

Throughout the series Milligan deconstructs and criticizes some of America's most sacred institutions. For the writer, few institutions epitomized the "smug reality of America" and the madness of obsession more than Hollywood and its "pathetic bunch of celluloid heroes."⁶⁹ For many readers *Shade #5* represented a "beautifully perverted story about a beautifully perverted industry: motion pictures." In Milligan's Hollywood "everyone is infected with madness. Everybody has a skeleton in their closet. Everyone is obsessed with beauty or money or success or power... Hollywood [was] a concentration of all that is wrong with [American] society in general, a place of madness long before *Shade* got involved."⁷⁰ In *Shade #16* Milligan questioned the very idea of America as a cultural entity. The story, taking place in the heyday of the Wild West, opens with Milligan's script philosophizing, "Just who does America think it is? Who or what is America anyway? Maybe Billy the Kid was right, there's no such thing as America. It's an illusion of homogeneity, a Wild West myth of a nation. As tangible as Doc Holliday's whiskey breath. Or a dream of tumbleweeds and tombstones..."⁷¹ While this obviously alludes to America's fascination with its own expansionist past, it contained a much more poignant question—What is America? In *Shade: the Changing Man #16* Milligan offered

⁶⁸ Peter Milligan, Chris Bachalo, and Mark Pennington, *Shade: The Changing Man #18*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 1–2.

⁶⁹ Charles J. Sperling, "Oh Say Can You Scream (Sperling Letter)," in *Shade: The Changing Man #12*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 25–26.

⁷⁰ Brent Legault, "Oh Say Can You Scream (Legault Letter)," in *Shade: The Changing Man #8*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 26; Rol Hirst, "Oh Say Can You Scream (Hirst Letter)," in *Shade: The Changing Man #8*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 26.

⁷¹ Peter Milligan, Chris Bachalo, and Mark Pennington, *Shade: The Changing Man #16*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 1–2.

perhaps his harshest critique of American culture. Shade, the story's main character, had not assimilated American culture, but was instead "overdosed and overloaded with America, he's poisoned, diseased, infected by America... he's got a galloping cancer inside him called America."⁷²

Delano, Morrison, and Milligan had radically different political agendas. Delano cynically attacked the economic impacts of conservative policies; Morrison rabidly denounced animal cruelty and environmental destruction; and Milligan deconstructed America's most venerated national myths. However, and despite their *Hellblazer* and *Animal Man* were very much symbols of an anti-conservative political agenda that had been popularized by Alan Moore just a few years prior. Despite Delano's sharp and uncompromising critiques of economic and social conservatism, the writer rarely strayed from traditional narrative techniques. Morrison and Milligan, however, frequently used uncommon narrative approaches to broach their distinct liberal political agendas and effectively challenged the conventionalities of the medium's narrative arrangement.

New Models of Narration

Hellblazer, *Animal Man*, and *Shade: the Changing Man* successfully attracted a more mature readership, the latter two employing especially complex narrative techniques. However, they ultimately paled in comparison with Gaiman's more-than-capable *Sandman* series. Less concerned with political gerrymandering than Delano, Morrison, or Milligan, Gaiman's work on *Sandman* was instead notable for the way in which the narrative was constructed. Gaiman crafted an intricate plot with myriad sub-plots (and sub-plots of sub-plots) that all fed back into the story proper. The complexity

⁷² Ibid., 1:11.

of the story did not go unnoticed by comic fans or other authors. Novelist Peter Straub noted that “Gaiman was telling this ambitious, complex story, and at the same time communicating very deep emotions and interesting ideas.” Straub was similarly impressed “by [Gaiman’s] ability to tie diverse story elements together. Some of his tales fold back in on themselves, others depart for completely foreign realms—and yet everything rhymes, everything connects towards a meaningful resolution.” Another novelist and nine-time recipient of the Hugo Award, Harlan Ellison, stated that, “Neil’s *Sandman* work is on par with great literature... in each generation there are a small number of talents who do the seminal work that influences everyone else. Neil is one of those talents.”⁷³

Sandman’s narrative structure was far more novelistic than other mainstream publications at the time. The entirety of *Sandman* is most easily broken into ten different story arcs, or in more novelistic terms, ten chapters. However, Gaiman strayed from the main story regularly and published single-issue *mise-en-scènes* that focused on ancillary characters that had been introduced several issues prior or would view Dream from different perspectives.⁷⁴ In much the same way that a novel’s narrative would be incongruous should a reader begin with the fifth chapter, attempting to read *Sandman* in the middle of its publication cycle would have a similar effect. The stories and characters would make little sense without the context of previous issues and story arcs. Few mainstream superhero publications have a seventy-five-issue story arc. Titles like *Batman*, *Superman*, *X-Men*, or *Spider-Man* have story arcs that usually span three to four issues. On one hand, this narrative structure promoted a regular readership to purchase

⁷³ Bender, *The Sandman Companion*, xii–xiii.

⁷⁴ Singer, *Grant Morrison*, 111.

comics on a monthly basis. On the other, new readers could be put off by the narrative obligation of having to have read all of the previous comics. Thus, *Sandman*'s readership would have to be regular consumers of the book, not fair-weather fans of the character. Considering that consumers would not likely purchase the title on a nostalgic whim or to consume a publicized story arc made *Sandman*, from a financial perspective, something of a commercial gamble. Knowing this, Gaiman initially expected the series to be cancelled – *Sandman* was, after all, not a superhero comic and gaining new audience members through a monthly publication that required having to read the entirety of the series was a daunting task in an industry dominated by obscenely muscled men in tights, implausibly shaped women, and story arcs that pandered to short attention spans.

Whether he knew it or not, Gaiman's narrative structure—separating story arcs with smaller stories—was the way of the future as the concept of the 'graphic novel' became increasingly cemented in the minds of consumers. Gaiman's decision to structure the larger narrative in that way allowed for the immediate publication of collected volumes, or trade paperbacks. For example, the story arc titled "Preludes and Nocturnes" was collected immediately after publication and published in what has since become *Sandman Volume 1*, which collects the first eight issues of the series. Of these eight issues only six, #2-7 fall under the story arc "Preludes and Nocturnes," while the first issue "Master of Dreams" and the eighth issue "The Sound of Her Wings" provide the back story of Dream and a conversation with Dream's sister, Death, respectively.⁷⁵ The narrative structure, along with DC Comics' willingness to quickly collect and publish bound volumes, provided the possibility of generating new readers that were able to

⁷⁵ Neil Gaiman et al., *The Absolute Sandman, Vol. 1*, vol. 1, 10 vols., Hardcover (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 2006).

quickly and cheaply become familiar with the context of *Sandman*'s story and subsequently become regular monthly consumers of the comic. This also had another effect; bound volumes of comics like *Sandman* became increasingly visible on bookstore shelves and were thus more visible to those who would have never walked into a retailer dedicated to the sale of comic books.⁷⁶

Anything but the Same Old Story

Each of these British creators used the comic book medium differently to purposefully attempt to mature the medium. As *Hellblazer*, *Animal Man*, *Sandman*, and *Shade* increased in popularity the readership reflected a more mature and generally older readership that readily engaged with the comics' content and their larger socio-cultural implications. What is more, the below reader letters, representative of a small fraction of the overall reader-responses to these titles, are highly indicative of the level of maturity the British scripted comics had achieved. Not only were consumer's having their expectations and ideologies challenged, it was being accomplished through a medium that had until recently been considered childish. Adult readers were taking comic books and their content seriously—the medium had shifted from a quick-read form of entertainment to one that was deserving of in depth socio-political analysis.

Delano's "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" storyline in *Hellblazer* #5 galvanized readers. Some consumers saw the story as a poignant reminder of the Vietnam War that had not been whitewashed into a heroic melodrama and applauded the fact that the issue did not deal with the monsters of the occult but instead "the monsters of our

⁷⁶ Singer, *Grant Morrison*, 111.

[human] souls.”⁷⁷ Other readers, however, lamented Constantine’s passive non-heroic role in the story. Constantine stood idly by as the horrific events transpired around him, either unable or unwilling to intervene. Of course Constantine’s inaction is in accordance with a character the writer described as “A devious creep with a lust for tragedy—a parasite who sucks up suffering, then gorged, takes his guilty pleasure in the aftermath.”⁷⁸ For other readers the impact of the story was more than a mere treatise on the Vietnam War and its horror, it was a story that summed up *Hellblazer* as a comic with the ability to “deliver pointed social satire” by mining an ever-renewable well of nightmares that is human civilization. *Hellblazer* #5 marked the point when many readers realized that “*Hellblazer* is as much about politics as it is about horror, or perhaps that politics is horrific” and that the book had “an on-going political subtext that [was] extremely rare in mainstream comics.”⁷⁹

Though Morrison lamented his inability to change the world through his writing many readers seemed to not only understand the mixture of blatant and subtle subtext with the shifting narrative of Animal but debated it publicly within the comic’s letter column, “Animal Writes.” In regards to Animal Man’s actions of freeing test animal or destroying whaling vessels, some readers saw a number of Baker’s actions as criminal, while others thought they were justified. Some wondered at Morrison’s animal rights and environmental agenda, sometimes berating the writer about his beliefs and championing their own. Other readers took Morrison’s message to heart by questioning from where their food came, consuming less meat, stating that “books like *Animal Man* are making us

⁷⁷ Curt Holman, “Voices from Beyond (Holman Letter),” in *John Constantine: Hellblazer* #8, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 25; Tony Collett, “Voices from Beyond (Collett Letter),” in *John Constantine: Hellblazer* #8, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 25.

⁷⁸ Delano, Jamie Delano Interview (Part I & II).

⁷⁹ Hatfield, “Voices from Beyond (Hatfield Letter),” 25–26; Steve Roby, “Voices from Beyond (Roby Letter),” in *John Constantine: Hellblazer* #8, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 26.

more aware of our problems,” and asking Morrison to provide more information in the pages of the comic about animal rights groups.⁸⁰ In the end, Morrison did not change the world but his work on *Animal Man* not only attracted an adult audience but engaged them in fundamental questions about the environment, animal rights, the notion of whether man should have dominion over beasts, and how is the worth of human life measured.

Gaiman’s *Sandman* series also enticed adult readers to the medium, despite comics’ well known plot inconsistencies. By the late 1980s, DC Comics had many titles that had been published monthly for more than three decades. Their overall narratives had become so convoluted, disjointed, and littered with inconsistency that in 1985 the publisher released a twelve issue series titled *Crisis on Infinite Earths* meant to consolidate and simplify storylines and characters of many of its legacy titles. Even this attempt was intricate; the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* storyline required the creation of fourteen alternate versions of Earth just to rectify the multitudinous inconsistencies.⁸¹ Considering Gaiman’s *Sandman* spanned two-thousand pages, a small fraction of the twenty-thousand pages of script Gaiman penned for the comic, the series could have fallen into the widely accepted comic book trope of incongruous storylines, failing to produce a cohesive whole.⁸² Instead, *Sandman* represents the first successful attempt of a mainstream comic to follow a cohesive narrative thread throughout its entire publication,

⁸⁰ Greg Morrow, “Animal Writes (Morrow Letter),” in *Animal Man* #21, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1990), 26; Robert A. Lugibihl, “Animal Writes (Lugibihl Letter),” in *Animal Man* #21, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1990), 25; Chris Khalaf, “Animal Writes (Kalaf Letter),” in *Animal Man* #22, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1990), 26; Mark Lucas, “Animal Writes (Lucas Letter),” in *Animal Man* #21, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1990), 25–26; Malcom Bourne, “Animal Writes (Bourne Letter),” in *Animal Man* #21, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1990), 25. Bourne and Lucas are regulars of the letter column; each having several letters published over the course of Morrison’s run on *Animal Man*.

⁸¹ Lou Mougin and Mark Waid, *The Official Crisis of Infinite Earths Crossover Index*, ed. Murray R. Ward, vol. #1 (New York: Independent Comics Group, 1986), 1–7.

⁸² Bender, *The Sandman Companion*, 10.

an achievement that did not go unrewarded or un-replicated. Regarding the latter, cohesive long-term story lines became a mainstay for the Vertigo imprint.

The *Sandman* books, because of their narrative complexity, meandering storylines, and often-sullen un-heroic protagonist, sold exceptionally well amongst adult readers. It was the first truly mass marketable mainstream adult comic.⁸³ During a signing in Los Angeles adults waited in a four hour line to have copies of trade paperbacks and single issues signed by Gaiman and one of the series' many artists Kelly Jones.⁸⁴ *Sandman* grew so far from its roots in superhero comics that "the book basically invented a new genre at the intersection of fantasy fiction, horror, and literature."⁸⁵ And adult readers responded well. With *Sandman #18*, DC Comics began printing reader response letters in the publication's back-matter. Like *Animal Man*, readers responded to the writer's work extensively in letters that did more than merely compliment but sought to extrapolate the complexity of the characters and stories as well as challenge the notion of comic books as a children's medium. Jay Austin of Charlottesville, Virginia wrote,

Sandman... is one of the most engaging, literate comics I've read. If one mark of a true artist is the ability to employ time-worn devices in new and interesting ways, then Mr. Gaiman certainly qualifies... Where many writers would have beaten us over the head with the "deep" messages that "history repeats itself..." Gaiman is content to relegate them to the background, preferring to tell a story that ultimately is about *people*, despite the unnaturalness of his protagonist. The combined result is a book that should convert anyone who is still inclined to doubt the potential of the comics medium.⁸⁶

⁸³ Alex Irvine, *The Vertigo Encyclopedia*, ed. Alastair Dougall (New York: DK Publishing, 2008), 146.

⁸⁴ "Bring Home the Movie House: [Home Edition]," *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 1992, sec. View.

⁸⁵ Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville can Teach us About Being Human*, 239–240.

⁸⁶ Jay E. Austin, "Writing in the Sand (Austin)," in *Sandman #18*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1990), 25.

Today's comics scholars tend to agree. Gaiman's narrative complexity is a resounding success in both the use of the medium and the means to tell a poignant story that appealed to a mature audience. Literary critic David E. Goldweber explained,

Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series contains some of the most horrifying scenes ever depicted in an American comic book. Throughout the 75-odd issues we see tortures, rapes, mutilations, and maimings; we see hapless people poisoned, lacerated, incinerated, melted, even shredded. There are countless moments of pain and loneliness, few of joy and laughter. Yet the ultimate effect of the books is a feeling of kindness, acceptance, consolation, mercy, and redemption.⁸⁷

Sandman was, without a doubt, the most complex mainstream comic being published in the late 1980s; that dark imagery, violence, and joylessness left readers with juxtaposed emotions attest to the story's complexity. Over a decade after its publication ended (March, 1996) literary theorists and critics are still dissecting the words, images, and the interplay between the two.

Like the other titles in this chapter, readers of *Shade: the Changing Man* also vocalized their opinions. Some readers initially viewed Milligan's critiques of America as the "reflexively snotty anti-Americanism" of a recently arrived Brit but quickly realized that Milligan's scripts offered "something much deeper."⁸⁸ As with most fan letter columns, readers praised Milligan's writing and the art of Chris Bachalo and Mark Pennington. However, *Shade's* letter column also hosted heated and complicated debates about the content of Milligan's scripts, revealing a well-read and engaged adult readership willing to scrutinize Milligan's scripts. Monthly reader and frequent writer

⁸⁷ David E. Goldweber, "The Function of Dreams and Stories in The Sandman," *International Journal of Comic Art* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 77.

⁸⁸ Ben Jones, "Oh Say Can You Scream (Jones Letter)," in *Shade: The Changing Man* #12, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 25.

Mark Lucas, beginning with a quote from the previously mentioned *Shade #5*, examined the issue's critique of Hollywood and its audience well,

America is scared to be alone. That's it! The proliferation of media images in American culture can only be accounted for by a general fear of loneliness and abandonment. Especially in the post-Vietnam era, the psychological threat of Armageddon is inescapable. How can we not fear the possibility of ever-imminent annihilation? We flood our senses with sound and images. We do not want to die alone.... [Milligan] is a '90s psychedelic psychologist, forcing us to view the realities we ignore.⁸⁹

Milligan forced readers to "to think about what we are reading rather than sit back and let formulaic stories wash over us" and remember that madness is "not just an external force, but it also lurks just below the veneer of sanity with which we cover our society. One scratch and it seeps through. Open any newspaper and you can see many examples" of how Milligan's critique of American culture was manifested in society.⁹⁰

Another reader went as far as to roll up a copy of *Shade #21*, put it into a bottle and throw it into the Pacific Ocean; the reader liked "the idea of someone finding it on a faraway beach and having their life changed, as [their] life had been changed."⁹¹

In his short essay "2000AD: Understanding the 'British Invasion' of American Comics," cultural scholar Ben Little posited that British comic creators were "taking their medium more seriously and were, with due concern, responding to the significant political and social changes occurring on both sides of the ocean in their work."⁹² Ben Little is correct in his assessment; however, he neglects two key factors. First, it was the acceptance of a mature American readership that provided a dedicated consumer base for

⁸⁹ Mark Lucas, "Oh Say Can You Scream (Lucas Letter)," in *Shade: The Changing Man #8*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 30.

⁹⁰ Wayne Symes, "Oh Say Can You Scream (Symes Letter)," in *Shade: The Changing Man #7*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 25; Martin Simcox, "Oh Say Can You Scream (Simcox Letter)," in *Shade: The Changing Man #8*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 30.

⁹¹ Charles Verland, "Oh Say Can You Scream (Verland Letter)," in *Shade: The Changing Man #27*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1992), 26.

⁹² Little, "2000AD: Understanding the 'British Invasion' of American Comics," 142.

the writers' work; one which recognized and analyzed the writers' political and narrative meanings. The second key factor was the interrelationship between the British creators and their American publishers and editors. It was primarily two women, Jenette Kahn and Karen Berger, who not only facilitated the 'British Invasion' of the medium but also compelled the Brits to push the boundaries of mainstream comics. By combining an Anglo-American cultural affinity with nuanced writing, unique artwork, and an outsider's perspective of US society, DC had inadvertently struck upon a winning formula, unofficially dubbed the 'Vertigo House Style'.

Chapter 5

If we want a better medium that produces work of excellence as often as prose or music does—if we want that ten percent to force the ninety percent from the shelves of comics stores—then we're going to have to do it ourselves. We're going to have to do it by starving out the crap and by making that new work ourselves, and as often as possible.

-Warren Ellis¹

Publications like *Sandman*, *Hellblazer*, *Shade*, and *Animal Man* helped expand DC's market share and gather more than a little public praise from fans and critics. Their popularity contradicted the notion that only superhero comics, a genre fostered by DC since 1939, were the only means of increasing sales and market exposure. DC's more sophisticated comics were being well received by regular readers of the medium as well as a newly tapped non-comic reading adult market, the latter of which turned to book retailers as opposed to specialty comic book sellers when making their purchases. Financially and critically speaking, DC's mature comic books had been a success. In response to that success DC examined the viability of success for a dedicated adult oriented imprint.

DC's first attempt at such an imprint came in 1987 when DC Comics announced Piranha Press, a distinctly separate imprint aimed at an adult readership.² It took nearly two years before Piranha Press published its first comic, *Beautiful Stories for Ugly Children*, in June 1989.³ Much of Piranha Press' publications were largely experimental and akin to the previous decade's independent comix movement, with which it shared many literary and artistic aspects including acid-trip aesthetics and Piranha Press's

¹ Warren Ellis, "Issue #3: There Aren't Enough Comics," *Come in Alone*, December 17, 1999.

² Gary Groth, "Newswatch: DC Aims to Take a Bite Out of Comics with Piranha," *The Comics Journal*, September 1987, 13.

³ David Louapre and Daniel Sweetman, *Beautiful Stories for Ugly Children* (New York: DC Comics/Piranha Press, 1989).

comics appealed to a tenuous and fading comic book readership that had moved onto the highbrow comics, including the popular projects of Jack Jackson, Harvey Pekar, and Art Spiegelman. Ultimately, DC's Piranha Press was a financial and critical failure. Early in its publication cycle the imprint was proving to be a financial drain on its parent company, while other independent publishers like Dark Horse, Caliber, and Epic, the latter of which was an imprint of Marvel, had already established themselves in the market.⁴ Experimental art, meandering storylines, and lengthy times between the publication of issues produced only one popularly and critically accepted work after *Beautiful Stories for Ugly Children*, Kyle Baker's *Why I Hate Saturn*, before the press was dissolved in 1994.⁵ Piranha Press's attempts at maturing the medium by rekindling the aesthetic conventions of underground comics were, in many ways, a misstep. American society and culture, not to mention comic consumers, had largely moved on from comix. Piranha Press was far afield of the mainstream and the comics of British creators were substantially different from the standard superhero fare for which DC had become known.

As Piranha Press began publishing, the British creators employed at DC Comics proper were maturing the medium through their work on *Sandman*, *Hellblazer*, *Shade*, and *Animal Man*. However, as storylines of British creators increasingly diverged from DC Comic's standard superhero fare, it became clear to Jenette Kahn, Dick Giordano, and Karen Berger that DC's non-legacy adult comics were in need of their own imprint.⁶

⁴ Alex Boney, "From Such Great Heights: The Birth of Vertigo Comics," *Back Issue*, July 2012, 67–68.

⁵ M. Keith Booker, ed., *Encyclopedia of Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 43–44.

⁶ Legacy characters are those characters which made DC Comics a popular publishing house. Despite the importance of *Dark Knight Returns*, *Killing Joke* and *Arkham Asylum* in the grand scheme of the maturation of American comic books, Batman, having been one of DC's staple characters since the late 1930s, would not make the transition to the Vertigo Imprint.

Karen Berger had cut her editorial teeth while working on *Swamp Thing* during Alan Moore's run on the series, and had been, along with Kahn and Giordano, instrumental in bringing British writers and artists under the DC umbrella, and fostered the British invasion's initial creative efforts. As the 1990s opened Berger continued her work as both a line-editor and a liaison to British creators. Under Berger's guidance came a series of titles that became known as 'Berger Books', including *The Nazz* by Tom Veitch and Bryan Talbot, *World Without End* by Jamie Delano and John Higgins, *Skreemer* by Peter Milligan, as well *Animal Man*, *Shade*, *Hellblazer*, and *Sandman*. Berger had made a name for herself as someone who simultaneously cultivated artistic creativity and produced comics that garnered both critical acclaim and financial success.⁷

For all its success in the late 1980s, as the 1990s opened DC lacked editorial consistency in its mature comics. Due to the nature of comic retailers, titles like violent, sexual, psychedelic, and bizarre series like *Beautiful Stories for Ugly Children*, *Sandman* and *Hellblazer* were sold next to *Superman*, *Wonder Woman*, and *Batman*: after all each title was emblazoned with the DC Comics logo. These factors placed DC Comics in a precarious position. However, the mature comics of Delano, Morrison, Milligan, and Gaiman had garnered DC a great deal of critical acclaim, prompted the rise of adult comic consumers, and placed the company's publications in new retail venues. Increasingly, the result was consumer confusion between DC's superhero comics and its 'For Mature Readers' publications, an issue that motivated some consumers, mostly

⁷ Jamie Delano et al., *Hellblazer* #1-40; #84, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics & DC Comics/Vertigo, 1988); Jamie Delano and John Higgins, *World Without End*, vol. #1-6 (New York: DC Comics, 1990); Neil Gaiman et al., *Sandman*, vol. #1-#75 (New York: DC Comics; DC Comics/Vertigo, 1989); Milligan, Bachalo, and Pennington, *Shade: The Changing Man* #18; Peter Milligan and Brett Ewins, *Skreemer* #1-6 (New York: DC Comics, 1989); Morrison and Truog, *Animal Man* #1-26; Tom Veitch and Bryan Talbot, *The Nazz*, vol. #1-4 (New York: DC Comics, 1990).

parents, to voice their displeasure at having youth and adult comics published under the same corporate logo.

The late 1980s and early 1990s was a period of negotiation between the mainstream comic book industry, comic reading adults, children, and parents. Books published with the 'For Mature Readers' taglines could not very well carry the Comics Code of Authority (CCA) seal, which despite waning influence was still held sway with consumers, at the same time. Conversely, while some DC titles were growing more accepted by adults, parents of young children saw the lack of a CCA seal on some comics as a sign of DC's moral failing.⁸ Thus, DC needed to negotiate the Jekyll and Hyde duality of its legacy as a publisher of children's comics and its new image as a purveyor of adult oriented sequential art all while increasing financial growth and market share. DC needed to somehow divorce, at least in the eyes of the comic consuming public, their legacy from their adult comics. Such an opportunity presented itself in 1991.

The Rise of Vertigo

By 1991 Karen Berger had become deeply involved with the British creators as well as their particular interests and creative styles. Indeed, the same creators Berger had poached from *2000 AD* and *Warrior* wrote all of the 'Berger Books'. When Berger took maternity leave in the winter of 1991 she continued to edit *Sandman* and *Shade: the Changing Man*, letting editing duties on the other 'Berger Book' fall to new editors. However, Berger did not spend her time away from the DC offices editing a pair of comics and being a new mother, it was during her maternity leave that the concept of Vertigo was first born.

⁸ Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 150–151.

In a 1991 meeting with Kahn, Giordano, and Paul Levitz, Berger discussed her return from maternity leave and future career with the publisher at length. Kahn, Giordano, and Levitz applauded Berger's editorial work. "The books you're editing," Kahn told Berger, "are very distinct and you really seem to be creating this new niche in the comics market and a lot of people are responding to it, and you've brought in so many interesting new writers and artists, and we'd really love it if you expanded it."⁹ Berger requested her own imprint to house the creative efforts of her writers and artists, an appeal to which Kahn readily acquiesced. Despite Piranha Press' financial difficulties the comic book industry was booming in the early 1990s and DC, flush with cash and intrepid executives, green-lit the Vertigo imprint. Upon returning to work Berger, with the blessing of Kahn, Giordano, and Levitz, began assembling a creative team and publishing plan for her emergent imprint.¹⁰

Berger announced the new imprint to consumers through an editorial in *Vertigo Preview #1*, released a year before Vertigo's launch. "Most of you already know that DC currently publishes six monthly titles that aren't quite like any other in the industry," Berger told readers: "*Sandman, Hellblazer, Doom Patrol, Animal Man, Swamp Thing, and Shade, the Changing Man*. But, despite producing comics that are challenging, disturbing and creatively singular, we've been an ill-defined lot. We've been called horror, mature, sophisticated, dark fantasy, cutting-edge and just plain weird."¹¹ Unsurprisingly, these six series formed the core of Vertigo's early publications; by the early 1990s the books had already formed their own little enclave within DC Comics.¹²

⁹ Boney, "From Such Great Heights: The Birth of Vertigo Comics," 68.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Karen Berger, "Editorial," in *Vertigo Preview*, vol. #1 (New York: DC Comics, 1992), 1–2.

¹² Jennifer M. Contino, "A Touch of Vertigo: Karen Berger," *Sequential Tart*, January 2001.

However, *Vertigo Preview #1* also introduced readers to several new titles that would eventually be published under the Vertigo imprint—Grant Morrison and Steve Yeowell’s *Sebastian O*, Peter Milligan and Duncan Fegredo’s *Enigma*, as well as Neil Gaiman and Chris Bachalo’s *Death: The High Cost of Living*. The first two titles represent the imprint’s first original creator-owned characters and marked wild departures from mainstream publications. *Death: the High Cost of Living*, a spin-off of Gaiman’s *Sandman* series, was essentially a public service announcement about the hardships of adolescence, depression, and suicide couched within the plotline of an existing popular title.¹³

Just as Berger brought DC’s ‘challenging and disturbing’ comics under the new imprint’s banner, so too did she tap many of the British artists who had risen to prominence making those comics. However, when building Vertigo’s creative team Berger also managed to coax former DC editor Art Young back to the company from Disney after Disney’s comic line, Touchmark, failed to materialize.¹⁴ Morrison, Milligan, Delano, and Gaiman made the initial leap from DC to Vertigo, to which Berger added Northern Ireland’s Garth Ennis who had taken over writing duties on *Hellblazer* with issue #41.¹⁵ Of the authors that comprised Vertigo’s creative staff, only two scriptwriters were not born in the UK (US citizens Nancy Collins and Rachel Pollack), however, the titles they scripted, *Swamp Thing* and *Doom Patrol*, were popularized by British writers (Moore and Morrison).¹⁶

¹³ Chris Bachalo et al., *Vertigo Preview #1* (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1992), 3–6; 13–14.

¹⁴ Boney, “From Such Great Heights: The Birth of Vertigo Comics,” 68.

¹⁵ Garth Ennis, Will Simpson, and Mark Pennington, *John Constantine: Hellblazer #41*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1991), 2.

¹⁶ Although these are the first two women comic creators mentioned in this work, DC/Vertigo was at the forefront of bringing women into the comic book industry as creators, editors, and executives.

Just as they had done at DC, the imprint's writers wanted to continue challenging the paradigm of mainstream comics.¹⁷ This development, internally known as the 'Vertigo House Style', was characterized as a creative adherence to artistically and literarily "saying something different in the world of comics."¹⁸ In Berger's words, the creators and titles forming the imprint's initial steps into the marketplace "created... this cutting-edge niche that was getting great response from readers and retailers."¹⁹ The Vertigo House Style was not so much an aesthetic foundation to be followed by writers and artists but a mantra to engage mature readers with mature content. Although Karen Berger was an industry outsider coming to the medium with a background in English and art history, like the British creators she edited, she saw a mostly untapped potential in the medium. For Berger it wasn't necessarily about pushing the boundaries of the medium but providing a forum "to show that there were people who could show that you could tell any kind of story in comics and don't ghettoize it into this adolescent male superhero niche..."²⁰ "What makes it a Vertigo book," Berger told *Sequential Tart* columnist Jennifer Contino, "is that the approach or the subject matter is there to provoke a response from the reader. We [Vertigo] do stories that look at the world differently and take a non-conventional point of view."²¹

While unfettered creativity certainly enticed British writers to Vertigo, they were also drawn to the imprint due to its contract model. Rights to original work created at Vertigo would remain in the hands of the creators. Characters like Animal Man, Sandman, Shade, Swamp Thing, and John Constantine were created under pay-to-hire

¹⁷ Karen Berger, Karen Berger Interview by Julia Round (PhD), May 11, 2008.

¹⁸ R. J. Carter, "Interview: Karen Berger: Reeling with Vertigo," *The Trades*, March 23, 2000, <http://www.the-trades.com/article.php?id=10494>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Berger, Karen Berger Interview by Julia Round (PhD).

²¹ Contino, "A Touch of Vertigo: Karen Berger."

contracts wherein the publisher retained the rights to the intellectual property of creators.²² Thus, most of Vertigo's earliest publications were still owned by DC Comics. Although, and compared their pay-to-hire counterparts, the creators were generally paid less per page under the Vertigo model, new properties and characters created under the imprint would remain the property of creators, as would royalties from monthly and trade paperback sales. Furthermore, Vertigo's creator-owned intellectual property could be sold or lent to other mediums, like film and television, without direct permission from DC or Vertigo Comics, though the imprint and its parent company would retain publishing and distribution rights and thus a share of the profits.²³ It is easy to see why this would have been an attractive system to young comic creators; Vertigo offered access to large corporate backing through its association with DC as well as ownership of intellectual property and a culture that fostered experimentation and innovation. Bolstered by the fact that Vertigo (with only one exception discussed later in the conclusion) placed no content bans on their publications, the imprint offered a singular experience for up and coming creators wishing to push the boundaries of the medium.²⁴

By the early 1990s, DC was considered the premiere publisher of mainstream comics. Next to legacy titles like *Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen*, and *Arkham Asylum* as well as its newer publications such as *Sandman*, *Animal Man*, *Hellblazer*, and *Shade*, the publications of DC Comic's biggest competitor, Marvel, looked "dated and

²² The term 'pay-to-hire' is a pejorative term used to describe inequitable contract arrangements between publisher and creator. Essentially it laments that in order to be or remain employed in the comic book industry creators had to pay the publisher in the currency of intellectual property.

²³ Richard Johnston, "Contractual Changes on Creator Owned DC Comics," *Bleeding Cool*, December 20, 2010, <http://www.bleedingcool.com/2010/12/20/contractual-changes-on-creator-owned-dc-comics/>.

²⁴ Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville can Teach us About Being Human*, 242.

uninspired.”²⁵ Marvel did not have any comparable titles of note to compete with the ‘Mature Readers’ books coming from DC/Vertigo or a creator-ownership model inspiring loyalty from its artists and writers. Marvel’s contentious relationship with its top talent inadvertently resulted in the creation of Vertigo’s most prominent market competition—Image Comics, a collective of disenfranchised Marvel expatriates whom, after being denied better royalties and ownership of their intellectual property, struck off on their own to form a new independent publishing house in 1992. Despite being Vertigo’s primary competition in the alternative comics marketplace, the only notable similarity between the two companies were their comparable creator-owned models. The writers and artists at Image produced superhero comics with large splash pages dedicated to pinup-styled hyper-masculine heroes, bright colors pressed against solid black shadows printed on high-quality gloss paper. In short, it was an artist’s imprint. Conversely, Vertigo was considered a writer’s imprint; its publications mostly eschewed über-masculine heroes, impossibly proportioned female bodies, dual-page slashes, high-contrast color schemes, and glossy pages.²⁶

The speculative *Wizard Magazine*, a trade publication that exalted the superhero genre, promoted the titles published by Image Comics by placing their characters on the magazine’s cover and allowing the titles disproportionate page real estate. The more

²⁵ George Khoury et al., *Image Comics: The Road to Independence* (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2007), 10.

²⁶ Brandon Choi and Jim Lee, *WildC.A.T.s*, vol. #1–4 (Berkley: Image Comics/Malibu Comics, 1992); Jamie Delano and Steve Pugh, *Animal Man*, vol. #51–54 (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1993); Garth Ennis et al., *Hellblazer*, vol. #41–44 (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1993); Neil Gaiman et al., *Sandman*, vol. #46–49 (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1993); Erik Larsen, *The Savage Dragon*, vol. #1–4 (Berkley: Image Comics/Malibu Comics, 1992); Rob Leiffield, *Youngblood*, vol. #1–4 (Berkley: Image Comics/Malibu Comics, 1992); Todd McFarlane, *Spawn*, vol. #1–4 (Berkley: Image Comics/Malibu Comics, 1992); Peter Milligan et al., *Shade: The Changing Man*, vol. #33–36 (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1993). The visual content of these eight titles were compared by company to determine the overall artistic aesthetic presented with the pages of the first four issues of each individual series.

critical and respected *Comics Journal* had a decidedly different opinion and decried “the fast-food quality of Image’s style.”²⁷ Alan Moore was even more critical of Image’s comics, referring to them as the sequential art equivalent of “crack cocaine, [a] wasteland of gibberish and incoherence, and indicative of the “plotless evolution always implicit in the superhero comic.”²⁸ Regardless of internal debates, sales numbers indicated consumers enthusiastically accepted the Hollywood blockbuster aesthetic of Image Comics’ publications. Grant Morrison saw Image Comics’ titles and sales numbers as a natural reaction against the maturation of the medium,

While the Brits remained foolishly intent on creating comic stories worthy of review alongside the latest novels in the *Guardian* literary section, a group of young American artists were preparing undeniable proof that comics would do much better business if they just looked cool and stopped trying to be so goddamned clever. In hindsight, it was America’s inevitable reaction to *Watchmen*, and the only response that could possibly be effective: Fuck realism, we just want our superheroes to look cool and kick ten thousand kinds of ass.²⁹

Image Comics’ two most popular titles, *Youngblood* and *Spawn* sold well in their first month of release. *Youngblood #1*, written and illustrated by Rob Leiffield, sold an impressive 325,000 copies its first month, while Todd McFarlane’s *Spawn #1* boasted an incredible 1.2 million, previously unheard of numbers for independent publishers.³⁰

Although Morrison understood the push and pull between creators, publishers, and consumers, the writer admits that “[a]t the time, it was a dreadful setback for the idea of ‘grown-up’ comics.”³¹

²⁷ Boney, “From Such Great Heights: The Birth of Vertigo Comics,” 70.

²⁸ Nick Hasted, “Whatever Happened to Alan Moore?,” *The Comics Journal*, January 1996, 112. Despite Moore’s vehement reproach of Image Comics, the writer spent five years working for the publisher (1993-1998).

²⁹ Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville can Teach us About Being Human*, 242–243.

³⁰ Lopes, *Demanding Respect*, 116.

³¹ Morrison, *Supergods*, 243.

The (brief) Fall of an Industry

The Vertigo imprint could not have launched at a better time. DC titles like *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, and *Sandman* had garnered critical praise, impressive sales numbers, and new readership. Independent comics such as *Maus*, *Comanche Moon*, and *American Splendor* had built cult followings amongst adult readers and been handed down awards from the literati's ivory tower. In 1992 Karen Berger and her team of mostly British writers made preparations to launch Vertigo at a time when the comic book industry was in a sharp upswing. Image Comics had managed its own little coup in 1992, usurping an astonishing 15% of the market in little over a year and almost every issue with the Image Comics logo in the corner sold 500,000 copies or more.³² The two worlds, mainstream and independent, were colliding. Writers like Gaiman, Morrison, Milligan, and Delano were taking mainstream comics into a new gray area and amalgamating different aspects of mainstream and independent comics. Artists were crossing the same boundaries. Dave McKean was turning mainstream comic art on its head in titles like *Arkham Asylum* and *Sandman* while David Mazzucchelli, who illustrated Frank Miller's script in *Batman: Year One*, was illustrating the lauded but underground *City of Glass* an "unfinished, maybe unfinishable [*sic*] scheme for a daring, re-newing and experimental symphony."³³

Just as comic books were making inroads into a wider pop culture acceptance in the early 1990s, they were also being introduced into academia. In 1994 Ohio State University Press began publishing *Inks: Cartoon and Comic Art Studies*, the first academic journal devoted to the medium. Edited by Lucy Shelton Caswell, *Inks* lasted

³² Khoury et al., *Image Comics: The Road to Independence*, 13–14.

³³ Joost Pollmann, "An Art of the Real: About the Adulthood of Contemporary Comics," *International Journal of Comic Art* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 110.

only four years (1994-1997) and has been described by Jared Gardner, professor of English & Film Studies at OSU, as “a journal that was ahead of its time, which in the world of academic publishing sadly meant that it was destined (like so many pioneering projects before it) for an early end.”³⁴ The publication of *Inks* (as well as Caswell’s editorial position) was not a curious example of the anomalies produced by historical contingency. When Berger proposed Vertigo in 1991 the comic book industry was surging financially; sales were up across the board and “people were buying everything coming out and sampling lots of material.”³⁵ With rising popularity and growing acceptance amongst a mushrooming readership the socially constructed stigma of comics shrank.³⁶ When combined, all of these components made the medium’s examination by academia inevitable.

Titles like *Watchmen*, *Sandman*, *Dark Knight Returns*, and *Arkham Asylum* as well as mainstream publishers’ standard superhero fare fed into the comic book boom. The upsurge in comic sales caused an escalation of specialty retail stores, rise of speculative collector markets, and publishers willing to feed such a speculative market. The boom of the early 1990s, however, was short lived. Just as the first titles under the Vertigo imprint were going to press, the comic book market, from publishers to retailers, began to implode. While mainstream publishing houses like DC and Marvel struggled through the downturn, the Vertigo imprint flourished by continuing to publish popular series, namely *Hellblazer* and *Sandman*, as well as original titles that were less affected than their mainstream counterparts by the market crash.

³⁴ Jared Gardner, “From the Editors’ Chair: Periodical Comics,” *American Periodicals* 17, no. 2 (2007): 139.

³⁵ Contino, “A Touch of Vertigo: Karen Berger.”

³⁶ Paul Douglas Lopes, “Culture and Stigma: Popular Culture and the Case of Comic Books,” *Sociological Forum* 21, no. 3 (September 2006): 409–411.

The near-collapse of the mainstream comic industry in 1993 had four primary causes: prominent creators, like those of Image, moving to independent or alternative publishers, collector speculation, a market supporting consumer collectability, and a distribution war between Diamond and Capital Distributors, all resulted in the industry's decline. The trading card market had collapsed under its own speculative bubble in 1992. Facing insolvency, trading card retailers scrambled for new financial opportunities, which they found in a comic book bull market supported simultaneously by legitimate reader demand and collector speculation. Rising from a mere 2,500 comic retail stores in 1989, 6,400 in 1992, and its peak in 1993 with over 9,400 specialized comic book retailers, the US consumer landscape was flush with new comic book vendors.³⁷ Retailers were staking their immediate pecuniary futures in the comic book boom and, in an attempt to recoup their fiscal loss, recently ruined trading card investors followed their local specialty retailers into the collectible comic book market. Operating under the same business model that caused the collapse of the trading card market, many of the new comic retailers schemed would-be investors into purchasing an abundance of comics that could never be resold, at least not at a profit.

Based on the recommendations and conjecture found in *Wizard Magazine* and *Comic Buyer's Guide*, speculator-buyers purchased a host of comic books.³⁸ Such magazines fueled the speculation boom by hypothesizing which comic books would and would not be 'worth' collecting. Swayed by such trade publications, collectors purchased accordingly, buying multiple copies of a single issue, placing them into protective sleeves having never been read. Mainstream comic publishers found themselves at a loss in

³⁷ Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, 148–149.

³⁸ Lopes, *Demanding Respect*, 104–105.

gauging the desires of their core market (long-time comic consumers). With no other recourse, mainstream publishers like DC and Marvel Comics, as well as Image, capitulated to speculative market demands by manufacturing product rarity, which only spurred on the industry's fiscal hardship.

Some companies courted would-be collectors by attempting to reestablish popular titles. Marvel re-launched popular titles like *Spider-Man* (1990) and the *X-Men* (1991). Responding in kind, DC released *Superman: the Man of Steel* and *Batman: Gotham Knights* in 1991. Although continuity of plot was never a hallmark of mainstream superhero comics, such re-launches ruined the progression of existing storylines. Each re-launch came with renewed numbering beginning at 1, commonly referred to as 'number-ones'. Thus, the *Spider-Man*, *X-Men*, and *Superman: the Man of Steel* comics were designated #1, issue numbers that, at least to collectors, were considered rare and thus supposedly more profitable. In conjunction with re-boots mainstream publishers, almost across the board, also began releasing multiple covers for single issues, many of which were garishly embossed, foiled, or holographic. *Venom #1*, published in 1992, for example, was pressed with four different covers, the standard newsstand cover in white, along with special retailer copies sporting red, black, and gold foil covers.³⁹ The revived *X-Men* line was released with an unheard of six variant covers, distributed as 1A through 1E; with the exception of the issue's cover, the body of the books were identical.⁴⁰

The release of 'number-ones' was meant to bolster sales to potential collectors, however, lack luster quality and a glutted market was often unkind to retailers attempting

³⁹ David Michelinie and Sam DeLaRosa, *Venom #1, Variant Covers* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1993). Originally billed as a six-part limited series, the comic has become an ongoing series titled *Venom: Lethal Protector*.

⁴⁰ Chris Claremont, Jim Lee, and Whilce Portacio, *X-Men*, vol. 2, 1A-1E ed., *Variant Covers* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1991).

to cash in on increasingly tenuous comic books sales numbers. For example, in 1993 retail-speculators ordered 1.7 million copies of *Turok #1*, however, less than 200,000 were actually sold. In the direct market, only selling 11% of an order was a catastrophic financial blow. However, poor quality was often combined with small publishers not being able to get comics to retailers with any kind of regularity. John Davis, owner of the now defunct comic distributor Capital City, complained of the inability of independent publishers like Valiant and Image, who were deeply entrenched in the speculative market and the two best selling alternative presses, rarely go to press on time. Some Image titles were more than six months late in making it to retail racks. Retailers ordered and paid for millions of copies based on speculation only to have discouraged readers evaporate before the comics were published.⁴¹

Not to be outdone, DC Comics began packaging its comics with various ‘collectible’ tie-ins to help move comics. One of the most blatant examples is *Superman #75*. Released January 1993, the issue marked the ‘death’ of DC’s most popular character. To mark the occasion DC released the comic with four different covers and three different editions—newsstand, collector’s, and platinum—all of which were sealed in a black plastic bag, thus would-be collectors could never be sure which of the variant covers were in their collection.⁴² Manager of Fantastic Store in Hollywood, California, Gaston Dominguez, commented on the packing by saying it resembled “a little body bag with a body in it.”⁴³ The collector’s edition came packaged with a host of frippery including a large color poster with ad material for other DC titles, a black armband

⁴¹ Gary Groth, “Interview with John Davis,” *The Comics Journal*, July 1996, 38–39.

⁴² Dan Jurgens et al., *Superman #75*, vol. 2, Variant Covers (New York: DC Comics, 1993).

⁴³ Faye Fiore, “Superman RIP: Man of Steel Gives His Life in Final Cause-Reviving Sales of His Comics,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1992, Home edition, sec. Metro, 1.

adorned with the Superman logo, a mock obituary made to look like a photocopied newspaper, a set of four stamps which were not paid postage, and a ‘trading card’ that was nothing more than an advertisement for an unreleased series of trading cards based on the *Superman* franchise.⁴⁴

While the comics sold extremely well, their public presentation was a device to draw in collector-speculators. Since sealed comics generally sell for higher prices in collectible markets, many collectors never bothered un-sealing the comic while comics fans, who had been taken in by the promise of financial return, often bought two copies, one to read and the other to seal away. The publishers’ ploy worked well. Collectors looking at comics as a future investment often bought, sealed, and stored at least one copy of each of the variant covers, meaning that many collectors held six copies of *X-Men #1*, four copies of *Venom #1*, two copies (at least) of *Superman #75*, and two copies of *Spider-Man #1*. Initially publishers reaped massive profits in a market based on speculation. All of *X-Men #1*’s variant covers, sold under separate universal product codes, were in the top ten best selling comics in 1991 with combined sales of approximately 8.1 million copies.⁴⁵ *Superman #75* reigned as the best selling comic the following year, boasting 3.1 million copies and was the biggest selling non-premiere comic book in the history of the medium.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Dan Jurgens et al., *Superman #75*, vol. 2, Collector's Edition (New York: DC Comics, 1993).

⁴⁵ Diamond Comic Distributors Inc., *1991 Annual Comic Book Sales Figures*, Yearly Sales Report (Timonium, MD: Diamond Comic Distributors, January 1992). Sales of the various covers ranked 2-4 and 6-8 on Diamond Distributors’ best selling comics, however, combining the sales of the six variant covers together places *X-Men #1* not only as the best selling comic in 1991, but the best selling single issue in the history of American comics.

⁴⁶ Diamond Comic Distributors Inc., *1992 Annual Comic Book Sales Figures*, Yearly Sales Report (Timonium, MD: Diamond Comic Distributors, January 1993). Due to the way in which comic books are distributed, titles are ordered by retailers several months in advance, *Superman #75* was the best-selling comic in 1992 despite an official release date of January 1993.

Not all retailers, fans, and presses were necessarily taken in by retailer's exploitation of the medium's patrons and publishers' encouragement of such practices. As purchasers lined the blocks outside comic retailers, many in the popular press saw through publishers' attempts to garner sales numbers by the increasingly common occurrence of killing off or maiming popular characters. When interviewed by the *Los Angeles Times* about *Superman* #75, eleven-year-old John Kim, who had never read a *Superman* comic in his life, admitted, "I'm just here 'cause he dies... For years, I've been thinking he'll never die. Now finally, aha!, here he is, dead."⁴⁷ Frank Rich, writing for the *New York Times*, was more outspoken, and used *Superman* #75 in particular as a means to condemn market speculation in general,

In death, the Man of Steel was reduced to the same clammy, mercantile status as such other extinct American icons as Moxie, the Packard, and the 45 R.P.M. record: he became a collectible. The teen-agers who lined up at the nation's newsstands and comic book stores on Wednesday had dollar signs, not tears, in their eyes. The issue of *Superman*... was bound to be worth more than its face value of \$1.25 someday. Or so its publishers would have young consumers believe.⁴⁸

According to Gary Groth, the publishers' role in the speculative market equated to nothing more than "too much snake oil," a veneer of worth placed upon tritely written and illustrated ephemera.⁴⁹

For many regular readers, the speculative market and distribution issues had poisoned the well. Lou Banks, president of independent publisher Dark Horse Comics, commented, "The net effect of the speculation boom was that the true consumers were drowned out. We couldn't tell what they liked or did not like... with publications they

⁴⁷ Fiore, "Superman RIP," 1.

⁴⁸ Frank Rich, "Term Limit for the Man of Steel: Yes, It's Time for Him to Go," *New York Times*, November 22, 1992, E1.

⁴⁹ Groth, "Interview with John Davis," 39.

found unreadable and cover prices they found unbearable, the real readers were chased out of the market.”⁵⁰ With Marvel and DC raising cover prices on their supposedly collectible comics and the declining quality of Marvel’s titles, many regular readers saw themselves as having been unfairly exploited by mainstream publishers, citing it as a primary reason for no longer consuming the medium.

Upon realizing that the value of stockpiled comics would not likely increase, many speculator-collectors followed the core readership in their exodus from the medium. For retailers, the results were catastrophic. The industry’s profits shrank by over 50% in three years from \$1 billion in 1993 to \$450 million in 1996, over the same time span the number of comic retailers saw a similar retreat from 9,400 to 4,500 three years later.⁵¹ Without available retailers, it became increasingly difficult for mainstream publishers to recover. Independent and alternative publications like Dark Horse, Paradox Press, Fantagraphics, Orion, Pantheon, and Vertigo, due to their unique and engaging content, remained far less affected than their mainstream counterparts. Though the exodus of young readers and speculators deflated the mainstream market by nearly 50% in three years, smaller alternative publishers managed to maintain satisfactory, in not exemplary, sales figures.⁵² The Vertigo imprint was not only unaffected by the market contraction but thrived amidst the wreckage of the mainstream industry.

Before the market’s collapse in 1993 “one of the problems that comics had,” according to Neil Gaiman and based on his personal experience as an adolescent comic reader, “is that you have this great captive audience who discover girls, beer, and whatever, and they go away. Or they get bored with superheroes and they go away. Or

⁵⁰ Greg Stump, “The State of the Industry, 1996,” *The Comics Journal*, July 1996, 33.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵² Groth, “Interview with John Davis,” 42.

they get laid and go away. Or they go off to college and their mum throws away their collection...”⁵³ However, in the wake of the market’s contraction, distributor demographics showed that the average age of comic readers was on the rise, indicating that many adult readers were not ‘going away’ but remaining with or gravitating toward the medium in unprecedented numbers.⁵⁴ The titles forming Vertigo’s initial publications—*Animal Man*, *Hellblazer*, *Swamp Thing*, *Shade*, *Doom Patrol*, and *Sandman*—had already tapped into the adult readership while under the DC banner. Their publication as Vertigo titles, no doubt bolstered by a less prominent presence of DC, only increased their per-month sales. For example, while the popularity of *Sandman* grew steadily under the DC logo, selling anywhere between 50,000 and 89,000 copies per month, averaging a respectable 65,000 copies per issue for the first forty-six issues, the title’s transition to Vertigo saw sales increase dramatically, averaging an astonishing 110,000 units per month with several issues managing a quarter of a million copies.⁵⁵ That is not to say that Vertigo’s popularity was strictly derived from its status as an alternative publisher. For the first year of Vertigo’s existence, the imprint’s covers displayed both the DC and Vertigo logos. In the court of public perception Vertigo’s connection with its parent company gave the burgeoning imprint a connection with a popular mainstream publisher, thus allowing Vertigo to continue catering to its adult readership while enticing readers of DC’s standard superhero fare to explore the more mature Vertigo titles.⁵⁶ At the emergence of the market’s downturn these factors led

⁵³ Gary Groth, “Bring Me a Dream: An Interview with Neil Gaiman,” *The Comics Journal*, November 1993, 72.

⁵⁴ Stump, “The State of the Industry, 1996,” 33.

⁵⁵ Groth, “Bring Me a Dream,” 71.

⁵⁶ Gary Groth, “The Room: Vertigo Roundtable,” *The Comics Journal*, November 1993, 56–57.

Karen Berger to claim, "...Vertigo is going to be left standing... because people read our books as oppose to collect them."⁵⁷

The imprint's appeal to adult readers can also be attributed to a different sales strategy. Vertigo, unlike its parent company, Marvel, or other independent publishers like Valiant and Image, refrained from pandering to speculators by offerings variant, foiled, or holographic covers. A lack of brash cover art no doubt endeared the imprint to adult readers tentatively considering taking up the medium, however, the popularity of Vertigo was also bolstered by DC's aggressive push into other retail venues more frequented by non-traditional comic readers. While Marvel expended its energy and finances on entering the direct sales market by being its own distributor, DC was looking beyond the comic shop. In 1995 DC Comics entered into a distribution deal with Waldenbooks in an effort to place collected trade paperbacks on store shelves regularly. For mainstream publishers, selling their wares in bookstores was a means of expanding the market and secondary income. For independent and alternative publishers, however, bookstores were seen as a potential "primary venue, frequented by "regular" adults and more conducive to selling non-superhero material."⁵⁸ The proliferation of trade paperbacks being sold in bookstores was a boon for Vertigo.

New and recently returned adult readers coming into the medium often entered in the middle of a large and intricate plotline. Finding back issues in a landscape where the number of retailers had contracted by almost half proved not only difficult but expensive as well. Despite the mainstream market collapse many existing retailers clung to the concept that even relatively recent back-issues were to be sold at substantially higher

⁵⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁵⁸ Darcy Sullivan, "More from the Moolahverse: The Case Against Bookstores," *The Comics Journal*, July 1995, 3.

prices.⁵⁹ Conversely, the trade paperback format offered none of the drawbacks of obtaining back issues. With trade paperbacks new readers could easily, quickly, and cheaply access the entire storyline and read it over the course of an afternoon. Simultaneously, although to the detriment of specialty retailers, the sale of trade paperbacks allowed small publishers like Vertigo to increase their profits and garner new readers. Given the contracts Vertigo's creators had with their publisher, bulk sales of trade paperbacks allowed the writers and artists to maintain a greater share of profits and perpetuated a willingness of Vertigo and its creators to sustain sales numbers through inventive and mature storytelling as oppose to fallacious claims of collectability contended by comic book speculators. Although none of Vertigo's periodical comics were among the top 300 best selling issues in 1994 or 1995, in 1994 the imprint boasted two trade paperbacks in the top 25 best selling titles and three in 1995.⁶⁰ For both company and creator, Vertigo's adept use of DC Comics' distribution deal with bookstores proved to be creatively and financially fruitful.

The downturn of the mainstream market combined with the peculiar growth of alternative publishers plunged pundits into a heated debate about the state of the medium. On one hand were those who sided with Art Spiegelman's statement that "this moment in comics is a time when there seems to be a lull in creativity."⁶¹ On the other hand were those who sided with another comix legend, Robert Crumb, who stated that writers and artists were "quietly turning out unassuming masterpieces right under your [readers']

⁵⁹ Stump, "The State of the Industry, 1996," 36.

⁶⁰ Diamond Comic Distributors Inc., *1994 Annual Comic Book Sales Figures*, Yearly Sales Report (Timonium, MD: Diamond Comic Distributors, January 1995); Diamond Comic Distributors Inc., *1995 Annual Comic Book Sales Figures*, Yearly Sales Report (Timonium, MD: Diamond Comic Distributors, January 1996).

⁶¹ Gary Groth, "Art Spiegelman, Part II," *The Comics Journal*, October 1995, 104.

goddamn noses!”⁶² Kent Worcester, professor of political science at Marymount Manhattan College and co-editor of *A Comics Studies Reader*, agreed with Crumb and cited Vertigo as one of “the various institutions that lend heft and punch to the activities of the profession” and a driving force behind how much the medium had changed and accomplished between 1993 and 1996.⁶³

Surviving the Fall

Vertigo’s survival in a market experiencing an extreme downturn was dependent on the work of creators developing comics for adult demographics. Although all of Vertigo’s launch titles were brought over from the DC Comics line, the ‘heft and punch’ that aided Vertigo’s survival in a hostile marketplace was inextricably linked to the creator-owned projects published by the imprint. What differentiated Vertigo from its mainstream contemporaries, as well as many of the smaller independent and alternative publishers, was an almost artisanal approach to creating comics. Many companies attempted to gauge the appetites of the consumers and produce as many comics, regardless of quality or repetitiveness, to fill the temporary niches of market demands. Conversely, Vertigo’s British creators were less concerned with capitulating to the demands of speculators and the subsequent artistic mediocrity that often followed, and instead opted to craft comics less influenced by the demands of a collector-based market.⁶⁴ The disparity in quality between Vertigo and many of its contemporaries resulted in a newfound critical praise for many of the nascent imprint’s titles. *The Comics*

⁶² R. Crumb, “Viva La Comix,” *The Comics Journal*, January 1996, 8.

⁶³ “‘These Are the Good Old Days.’ A Critical Roundtable on the State of the Medium,” *The Comics Journal*, July 1996, 118.

⁶⁴ Glen Norcliffe and Olivero Rendace, “New Geographies of Comic Book Production in North America: The New Artisan, Distancing, and the Periodic Social Economy,” *Economic Geography* 79, no. 3 (July 2003): 246–248.

Journal, notoriously disparaging of mainstream comics, started to take notice of the DC owned imprint and the British creators' refusal to capitulate to speculators. As a result in the *Journal* reviewed and dissected the British writers' works with more frequency and kinder words usually reserved for independently owned publishers.⁶⁵

Taking over *Animal Man* for Morrison on issue twenty-seven, Jamie Delano continued the series through the creation of the Vertigo until January 1995, exploring many of the same themes of environmental consciousness initiated by Morrison. He did not produce a creator-owned property until 1995's six-issue mini-series *Ghostdancing*. Vertigo's other British creators, however, began publishing their first creator-owned projects under the Vertigo imprint almost immediately, each embracing their newfound creative freedom rather differently. Morrison's first Vertigo offering was *Sebastian O*, a three issue mini-series published between May and July of 1993. Set in a steampunk version of Victorian Era London, *Sebastian O* eschewed the spandex uniforms and bulging muscles of mainstream superhero comics in favor of dapper suits and slender body types reminiscent of Victorian clothing advertisements. However, at its core, *Sebastian O* was very much a superhero comic that held to many of the revisionist tropes popularized in the late 1980s, including an anti-heroic protagonist, sexual ambiguity, and characters with superhuman abilities.⁶⁶

Of all the British creators employed at Vertigo in the 1990s, Morrison was the only one to openly embrace the superhero archetype, which was manifested in the wildly popular *The Invisibles*, first published in September 1994. *The Invisibles*, even more so than *Arkham Asylum*, is often regarded as Morrison's career-defining work despite the

⁶⁵ Rich Kreiner, "Vertiginous Heroes: Animal Man and Shade the Changing Man," *The Comics Journal*, November 1993, 43–44.

⁶⁶ Grant Morrison and Steve Yeowell, *Sebastian O #1-3* (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1993).

latter's impressive sales numbers. It also stands as one of Vertigo's few superhero comic series. There is an odd duality in Morrison's *The Invisibles*. On the one hand it is a superhero comic complete with supernatural powers; the story's protagonists—Jack Frost, Lord Fanny, Ragged Robin, King Mob, and the modestly named Boy—are tasked with the most standard of superhero errands, save the world. As such, they stand as “humanity's last hope in the face of the ultimate, never-ending nightmare.”⁶⁷ In the grand superhero tradition of the Golden and Silver Ages, the heroes and villains of *The Invisibles* were clearly defined; good and evil were never in question even if the heroes were not always heroic in the classical sense.

The title's longevity and popularity amongst Vertigo's mature readership was largely due to the fact that the heroes of *The Invisibles* was not standard superhero fare, the plotline was deeply philosophical. Hardly stock mainstream superheroes the title's antagonists were comprised of an anarchist, an ex-New York City cop, a transvestite Shaman, an expert in psychic, occult, and tantric arts, and a time-traveling witch from the future. More importantly, however, is that over the course of its 59 issues (published in three volumes between September 1994 and June 2000), *The Invisibles* tackles complex philosophical debates not found in mainstream superhero comics. The first two volumes adopted a Manichean philosophy, pitting the purity of the mind/soul (associated with the protagonists) with the corruption of the physical body (embodied by the antagonists). In the third volume, however, Morrison's script turns toward philosophical monism,

⁶⁷ Grant Morrison, Phil Jimenez, and John Stokes, *The Invisibles #1*, vol. 2 (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1997), 2.

“Everything is one. Everything is unified.”⁶⁸ However, as with most of Vertigo creators, Morrison, despite repeated professions of love for the genre, occasionally eschewed superheroes in favor of smaller narratives. Published in 1995, Morrison’s *Kill Your Boyfriend*, a one-shot, was the coming of age story of a teenage girl as she struggled with the social and biological trials of adolescence. Unwilling to forego all mainstream conventions, Morrison also added a *Natural Born Killers*-esque narrative of violence, sex, and drug abuse to the plotline.⁶⁹

While still working on *Shade: the Changing Man*, Peter Milligan also wrote scripts for two comic mini-series, the eight-issue *Enigma* and four-issue *The Extremist*, both of which featured a costumed but un-heroic protagonist. Although the two works contained wildly different plotlines (*Enigma* questioned the ways in which perception constructed reality whereas *The Extremist* was a story about revenge), the two works shared a distinct philosophical tonality. Both *The Extremist* and *Enigma* used the comic book medium to explore the ways in which people form their sexual and moral identities.⁷⁰ Milligan’s scripts did not treat sexuality and morality as a singular identity or even an overlapping identity or set of identities. In both texts Milligan portrayed sexuality and morality as distinctly different; an individual’s moral identity did not inform their sexual one and vice versa. In this regard *Enigma* and *The Extremist* integrated social philosophies that had been manifested in the underground comix scene of the 1960s and 70s exploring the various aspects of sadomasochism, homosexuality, fetishes, and sexual

⁶⁸ Timothy Callahan, “‘Different Every Time’: An Introduction,” in *Our Sentence Is Up: Seeing Grant Morrison’s The Invisibles*, Kindle (Edwardsville, IL: Sequart Research and Literacy Organization, 2010), Loc. 155–170.

⁶⁹ Grant Morrison, Philip Bond, and D’Israeli, *Kill Your Boyfriend* (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1995).

⁷⁰ Greg Burgas, “Comics You Should Own: Enigma,” *Comic Book Resources*, February 18, 2007, <http://goodcomics.comicbookresources.com/2007/02/18/comics-you-should-own-enigma/>; Greg Burgas, “Comics You Should Own: The Extremist,” *Comic Book Resources*, April 9, 2007, <http://goodcomics.comicbookresources.com/2007/04/09/comics-you-should-own-the-extremist/>.

addiction as well as love, lust, violence, and obsession. Milligan's mature treatment of morality and sexuality prompted Art Young, Vertigo's senior editor at the time, to send a letter to retailers who had ordered *The Extremist* and other Vertigo titles thanking them for providing comic readers with alternatives to superhero comics on their store shelves.⁷¹

Much like Delano, Gaiman primarily continued to work on the *Sandman* series or spin-off titles around the series' popular Death character. However, he produced an anomalous spin-off title, *Death Talks About Life*. Featuring Death, who was portrayed as an attractive female as opposed to the scythe-wielding skeleton of popular lore, *Death Talks About Life* amounts to a public service announcement regarding the ways in which people transmit AIDS as well as means to avoid its contraction. From the front cover it is readily apparent that the book will address topics not usually found in comic books, "It's every bit as possible that you suspect you'll be offended by any mention that human beings have things under their clothes, let alone that they do anything interesting with them. If you suspect you're going to be one of the people, there's a really easy solution to this. Don't read it. It's as simple as that."⁷² The comic begins by dispelling the common myths of AIDS held in the early 1990s, addressing the misconceptions that AIDS was specific to those of one sexual orientation or race. Also, *Death Talks About Life* treated readers as sexually and socially active and aware adults. The comic does not propose that readers stay drug/alcohol free or remain abstinent but instead exercise caution and practice safe sex; there are even several panels in which Death diagrams how to properly use a condom on a banana.⁷³ While the comic, published at Vertigo's expense (copies

⁷¹ Peter Milligan and Ted McKeever, *The Extremist #1* (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1993), 3.

⁷² Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, *Death Talks About Life* (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1994), Cover.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1–5. Gaiman and McKean also published *The Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy of Mr. Punch* in 1994 through Victor Gollancz Ltd. in the UK. *Mr. Punch* was subsequently published under the Vertigo

were to be given away for free at retailer locations), is a clear indicator of the imprint's demographic – sexually active teenagers and adults—it is also indicative of Vertigo's approach to comics in general. Readers, whether or not they had officially achieved the age of eighteen, were treated as mature individuals with the capacity to consume complex, uncomfortable, and often-contentious sociocultural issues through comic books.

A Preacher and a Journalist Walk into a Bar...

In the midst of the market's turmoil and not willing to rest on its laurels, Vertigo introduced two additional young Brits, Garth Ennis and Warren Ellis, to its stable of writers. Like their British predecessors, Ennis and Ellis came from working-class families, consumed comics in their adolescence, and were familiar with non-comic literary traditions. However, these similarities were manifested differently in the properties they produced for Vertigo. Their heroes either lacked special abilities, or 'super powers,' as was the case of Ellis or, in the case of Ennis, refrained from using them on moral grounds. The stories were also different; they were *more* everything; more 'American,' more political, more satirical, and simultaneously more rancorous and affectionate in their critiques of US society and culture. Ultimately then, the works of Ennis and Ellis, *Preacher* and *Transmetropolitan* respectively, marked a departure from the popular Vertigo titles that had come before them and satisfied the Doom Generation's "seeking [of] answers to questions that may not have acceptable answers, a generation

banner a year later. According to the 1994 and 1995 Diamond Distributor *Annual Comic Book Sales Reports*, the graphic novel sold extremely well in the United States, the UK printing was ranked 10th in overall trade paperback sales in 1994 and twelfth in 1995.

feeling disenfranchised” with traditional ideologies revolving around religion and politics.⁷⁴

Born in 1970 to a working-class family in Northern Ireland, Garth Ennis never saw writing or comic books as a viable career. However, in his late teens Ennis was introduced to the medium’s mature titles, specifically those of Moore and Miller, which he cited as the comics that allowed him to see the creative potential in the medium. Further influenced by *Crisis*, a politically oriented British comic anthology, Ennis embarked on his own comic book writing career in 1998 with *Troubled Souls*.⁷⁵ He later moved on to the popular *Judge Dredd* series (published in *2000 AD*) where he unknowingly distinguished himself to Jenette Kahn and Karen Berger. Less than two years after his comic book debut, Ennis published his first American comic, *Hellblazer* #41, in May 1991.⁷⁶ Ennis continued to script *Hellblazer* through the creation of Vertigo, finally passing off scripting duties in October 1994.

Ennis’s run on *Hellblazer* proved to be popular with Vertigo’s readership, however, the Irish writer’s biggest contribution to the maturation of the medium was *Preacher*, published from April 1995 to October 2000. Co-owned by Ennis and artist Steve Dillon, *Preacher* marked Vertigo’s first massively popular fully creator-owned project. *Preacher*’s storyline is a complex interweaving of characters, although the story concentrates on three main protagonists: Jesse Custer, his partner Tulip O’Hare, and Cassidy, Jesse’s best friend. At its core, the plot revolves around Custer, a Texan preacher, who has lost his faith upon finding out that God no longer resides in heaven.

⁷⁴ Mike Grimshaw, “On Preacher (Or, the Death of God in Pictures),” in *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, ed. A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2010), 149.

⁷⁵ Carroll, “Trailblazers,” 48–50.

⁷⁶ Karen Berger, “Voices from Beyond (Never Say Goodbye Dept.),” in *John Constantine: Hellblazer* #40, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1991), 35.

The driving force behind Custer's international adventure is his literal search for God, who he plans to bring to account for the ills that plague mankind. Along the way Custer meets up with his estranged love Tulip and befriends an Irish vampire named Proinsias Cassidy (who goes simply by Cassidy). Through a series of intertwining plots Custer interacts with angels, demons, corrupt corporations, racists, silk-stocking sadists, a serial killer, a clandestine organization attempting to initiate the apocalypse, the devil, the Angel of Death, God, and, most horrifyingly, his family. When asked to describe his work, Ennis emphasized, "the odd-ball aspect of it, the fact it's a bit mad, that there's plenty of lunatic stuff happening... it's all, my God, what's going to happen next?"⁷⁷ However, as critic David Carroll argued, beneath the "...tasty brew of sex, violence and swearing with which to wash down a rollercoaster ride of a story that's peopled by some of the strangest sons-of-bitches to ever draw breath" were genuinely intellectual examinations of the nature of God, national myth, and the 'American Way'.⁷⁸

Ennis' critique of the Abrahamic God is couched in terms of the old question, "if God is righteous, benevolent, all-knowing, and all powerful, why does evil and tragedy exist in the world?" It is this very question that initiates the story's entire plot as Jesse Custer begins his trek to find God and bring him to account for not only for abdicating heaven but for allowing evil and tragedy to run rampant on Earth. In his critique, Ennis portrays God in several contradictory contexts. There is, of course, the wrathful God of the first testament and the infinitely loving God of the second, which Ennis satirized

⁷⁷ Carroll, "Trailblazers," 49.

⁷⁸ Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, *Preacher #1* (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1995), 41.

frequently.⁷⁹ By way of illustration, in a purposeful image/text combination meant to show such a satirical paradox, during a face-to-face meeting between Custer and God, the latter changes physical form from a diminutive being to a one of imposing size and musculature, shouting angrily, “Believe in the loving God!”⁸⁰

Although Ennis’s critique of the nature of God was the plot’s driving force, the author’s most prominent intellectual examination was of US culture and myth. When Ennis and Dillon were constructing the literary and aesthetic ideas that became *Preacher* it was decided that it would be a distinctly ‘American’ story. In a 2011 interview Ennis confessed,

I realized early on this was going to be a completely American story, the characters would be American, the myths it drew on would be American. Obviously the Western is going to be a big part of that; it’s a young country, and what happens in the West, 1840–1890, is really when the Wild West as we really understand it rose and fell. Obviously it cast a long shadow over the country’s myths and legends, so that was going to be a huge influence.⁸¹

In *Preacher*, America and its history are paradoxical, real myths as it were. According to American novelist Joe R. Lansdale, *Preacher* got the American spirit “right—or at least the mythical spirit...”⁸²

Although Custer’s quest carried him to New York City, Paris, and Los Angeles, the series’ plot is most focused on the American South—Texas, Louisiana, and the small towns in between metropolitan centers, leading comics scholar Nicholas Labarre to state,

⁷⁹ Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, *Preacher: Until the End of the World*, vol. 2, Trade Paperback (New York; London: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1997), 92–95 & 107–108; Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, *Preacher: Salvation*, vol. 7, Trade Paperback (New York; London: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1999), 203–207.

⁸⁰ Darby Orcutt, “Comics and Religion: Theoretical Connections,” in *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, ed. A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2010), 94.

⁸¹ William Grady, “Garth Ennis Interview: Comics and Conflicts Conference, London, 19 August 2011,” *Studies in Comics* 3, no. 1 (2012): 18.

⁸² Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, *Preacher: Gone to Texas*, vol. 1, Trade Paperback (New York; London: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1996), 1.

“...*Preacher* belongs to the field of southern fiction.”⁸³ In *Preacher*, Ennis used a series of stock icons, characters, and stories borrowed from pop culture, however, these stock motifs were used to turn American myth and historical memory on its head.⁸⁴ Ennis pits the various stock icons against one another throughout *Preacher*'s sixty-six issues. Ennis's American South, as a mindset and geographical location, is oxymoronic. *Preacher*'s southern population was rife with pejorative pop culture stereotypes; however, this was often contrasted with a positive view of the South and southerners. For every case of bestiality, inbreeding, or extreme racism there are genuine acts of kindness and solidarity, usually couched in terms of communal libertarianism.⁸⁵ The overall effect is that *Preacher* created “a space where symbols and representations of the South [could] be freely examined and reevaluated, placed into conversation and conflict.”⁸⁶

If Ennis used the comic book format to critique America's religion, myth, and rural South through *Preacher*'s action-movie styled narrative, his close friend Warren Ellis used the medium to comment on American politics, media culture, and urban blight of the US in his critically acclaimed *Transmetropolitan*. Ellis, a working class Brit born in Essex, had spent his youth reading *2000 AD* and admitted that “it was like bringing up a little kid on lemonade, and then, when he's 9 years old, giving him crack... I was hooked.”⁸⁷ Ellis began his career like his fellow British creators, publishing in *2000 AD*,

⁸³ Nicholas Labarre, “Meat Fiction and Burning Western Light,” in *Comics and the U.S. South* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 242.

⁸⁴ Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 76.

⁸⁵ Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, *Preacher #8-10* (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1995); Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, *Preacher #41-50* (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1998). Although these elements permeate the entirety of *Preacher*'s myriad plotlines, the story arcs found in these issues, “Angelville” and “Salvation” respectively, are most emblematic of the relationship between positive and negative examinations of the US south.

⁸⁶ Labarre, “Meat Fiction and Burning Western Light,” 244.

⁸⁷ Chris Hutchins and Stephen Ellison, “Warren Ellis: The Wizard Q & A,” *Wizard: The Comics Magazine*, February 1999, 44.

Warrior, and various other UK publications. Unlike the other Vertigo writers, who had signed with the imprint straight away, Ellis's US comics career and *Transmetropolitan* began at Helix, a separate DC imprint dedicated to science fiction and founded on the success of Vertigo. Launched in 1996, Helix entered the marketplace just as the effects of industry speculation were having their most devastating financial effects. And as the year drew to a close Helix, floundering in obscurity, *Transmetropolitan* being the imprint's only salable title, and the dissolution of the imprint imminent, Ellis and Darick Robertson, artist and co-creator, were asked to continue the title under the Vertigo logo.⁸⁸

Transmetropolitan's plot is perhaps the most absurdist of all the British Vertigo books. Set during the 23rd century in an American metropolis simply called 'The City', the series follows Spider Jerusalem, a journalist whose character model was a combination of Hunter S. Thompson's "love for guns, drugs, and vulgar and violent language" and Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilism. From the very beginning of the series Jerusalem's nihilistic nature was evident; the character was unapologetically "anti-media, anti-religious, anti-politics, and anti-establishment. His dialogue towards the people he encounters is hateful, violent, critical, cynical," and often times completely deranged.⁸⁹ Ellis asserted that Jerusalem's nihilism "is me when I get up in the morning. I hate everything in the morning. I hate mornings, too... I loved writing that voice. Suffused with hatred for everything."⁹⁰ However, for all of its dark comedic absurdity, critic and

⁸⁸ Brett Williams, "From Helix to Vertigo: The Unusual Publication History of *Transmetropolitan*," in *Shot in the Face: a Savage Journey into the Heart of Transmetropolitan*, Manuscript (Moro, IL: Sequart Research and Literacy Organization, 2012), 37–40.

⁸⁹ Daniel N. Gullotta, "Spider Jerusalem and Friedrich Nietzsche," *Sequart Research & Literacy Organization*, September 6, 2011.

⁹⁰ Keri Allan, "Warren Ellis Interview," *Sci-Fi Online*, March 8, 2001, http://sci-fi-online.com/Interview/03-08-01_WarrenEllis.htm.

journalist Keri Allan declared, “*Transmetropolitan* is a work of literary and philosophical depth.”⁹¹

Transmetropolitan's core plot thread revolved around Jerusalem and his two assistants, Channon Yarrow and Yelena Rossini, and their attempts to uncover the truth behind an upcoming presidential election between ‘The Beast’ and Gary Callahan pejoratively called ‘The Smiler’. Within that context, however, Ellis managed to capture the growing American disenchantment of American voters and politics. The incumbent Beast, whose real name is never given in the script, is an archetypal Nixononian character whose political philosophy was “if fifty-one percent eat a meal tomorrow and forty-nine percent don’t, I’ve done my job. That is the absolute fucking limit of what can be done. Anyone who says otherwise is a con artist. My job is just to keep things the way they are.”⁹² Callahan, with his “head full of bad wiring and hidden bleakness...” was even more heartless, telling Jerusalem “I hate people more than anything. And I’m going to be president... I hate you all, you know? All you scum. I want to be president because I hate you. I want to fuck with you... make you shut up and do things properly. Get through your doomed little lives quietly.”⁹³

Despite Jerusalem’s best efforts Callahan is voted into office and immediately abuses his power by cutting amendments from the constitution as well as sanctioning political assassinations, police led massacres, and the purposeful spreading of lethal biological agents in impoverished poor neighborhoods. Ellis used this particular plot device to address voter apathy. Jerusalem, distraught at the Smiler’s election to office,

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Warren Ellis, Darick Robertson, and Rodney Ramos, *Transmetropolitan: The New Scum*, vol. 4, Trade Paperback (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1999), 66.

⁹³ Warren Ellis, Darick Robertson, and Rodney Ramos, *Transmetropolitan: Year of the Bastard*, vol. 3, Trade Paperback (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1999), 42–43; Ellis, Robertson, and Ramos, *The New Scum*, 4:99–103.

screams down at the city from a balcony, “you [voters] useless bastards can’t get anything right, can you? Useless betraying fuckers, I give you the truth and you do nothing...”⁹⁴ Throughout the sixty scripts that comprise *Transmetropolitan*’s story, Ellis managed to satirically critique other political and cultural aspects of the United States. In the “Gouge Away” story arch, Ellis uses his scripts to condemn the American political system’s use of bribery, lobbyists, and political fixers as inherent to the democratic process.⁹⁵ Less dramatically, although no less viciously, Ellis used also used the series to critique media consumerism. After Callahan came to power, Jerusalem’s journalism license was revoked, forcing him to publish his articles digitally as a guerilla journalist. In his first article published on ‘The Hole’, a pirate newsfeed site, Jerusalem tells readers that they have to search for the truth, that they simply cannot expect to pick up a newspaper or read a news website for the sports page or TV listings and expect to be a well informed citizen.⁹⁶

According to comics scholar Michael Hicks, when *Transmetropolitan* was first published it was “a bleak prediction from Ellis about the societal trends threatening to corrupt and curtail freedom. He warned us away from being passive consumers of messages...”⁹⁷ Though much of *Transmetropolitan*’s absurdist plot appeared to be distressingly dystopian in nature, it was skillfully used to draw attention to social issues faced by the ‘New Scum’, a term used by Ellis to denote not only societal outcasts, but the under, working, and middle classes as well as college students, artists, and small business owners. Throughout the scripts composing *Transmetropolitan* Ellis rallied

⁹⁴ Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson, *Transmetropolitan #24* (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1999), 24.

⁹⁵ Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson, *Transmetropolitan #34-36* (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 2000).

⁹⁶ Warren Ellis, Darick Robertson, and Rodney Ramos, *Transmetropolitan: Spider’s Thrash*, vol. 7, Trade Paperback (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1999), 66–67.

⁹⁷ Michael Hicks, “Transmetropolitan Vol. 1-10,” *Graphic Novel Reporter*, accessed January 17, 2013, <http://graphicnovelreporter.com>.

against poverty and the disproportionate rates of sickness, disease, prostitution, malnutrition, lack of education, and drug use amongst the ‘New Scum’ for which the author seemed to have a genuine affinity. More importantly, however, is that the reader is considered part of the New Scum, a title used warmly by the author. As literary critic Kevin Thurman put it, Ellis “never denigrat[ed] the audience by accusing them of stupidity, rather he screams at the reader” that they are smart, although perhaps too lazy.⁹⁸

Preacher was well received by fans and critics. Writing for *The Comics Journal*, Jeff Winbush noted Ennis’ ability to write for shock value, but also argued that within *Preacher*’s violent absurdity there existed a great deal of intellectual depth in the writer’s sociocultural commentary.⁹⁹ Ennis’s critiques were meant to draw attention to, especially to religion, “When it comes to writing my stuff I either ridicule it or attack it,” Ennis admitted in an interview.¹⁰⁰ Despite the author’s purposeful attempts at provoking a response from readers, throughout the sixty-six issues readers rarely voiced displeasure or contempt at Ennis’ condemnation of God and religion, portrayals of the South, or Dillon’s graphic depictions of sex and violence. Indeed, the most significant series of angry responses were due to ‘The Story of You-Know-Who’ plot arc in which a young disaffected youth, only known as Arseface, shoots himself in an effort to emulate Kurt Cobain’s suicide.¹⁰¹ Similarly, Ennis did not do himself any favors when he used *Preacher*’s dialogue to describe Cobain’s band, Nirvana, as “a downs syndrome fella set

⁹⁸ Kevin Thurman, “Let Us All Drown Screaming: Transmetropolitan and Warren Ellis’s Body of Work,” in *Shot in the Face: a Savage Journey into the Heart of Transmetropolitan*, Manuscript (Moro, IL: Sequart Research and Literacy Organization, 2012), 44.

⁹⁹ Jeff Winbush, “Review: Preacher Special: The Story of You-Know-Who,” *The Comics Journal*, September 1996, 49.

¹⁰⁰ Carroll, “Trailblazers,” 47.

¹⁰¹ Garth Ennis and Richard Case, *Preacher: The Story of You-Konw-Who* (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1996).

to music.”¹⁰² Unlike Cobain, Arseface survives his suicide attempt, and within *Preacher*’s plot, gains a great deal of fame by, ironically enough, becoming the lead singer for a grunge band. The parallels and satire present in Ennis’ script did not escape the notice of readers, whom wrote in to object to Ennis’ treatment of Cobain, one reader stating, “I do not wish to ever see such a horrid story again. Give the dead some respect, I implore you.”¹⁰³

By and large, however, fan and critic response to *Preacher* was positive. The series’ monthly sales were steady, averaging a respectable 44,056 copies per month, peaking at 73,600 in June 1996.¹⁰⁴ While these numbers were not as high as those of *Sandman*, for a small imprint like Vertigo 44,000 copies per month meant that they were besting sales numbers of comic series that had long established characters and readerships, as well as the benefit of large corporate logos and advertising budgets. *Preacher* was regularly out selling titles such as *Ironman*, *Punisher*, *Daredevil*, *Justice League of America*, *Wonder Woman*, and even Vertigo’s own *Hellblazer*, a testament to its popularity.¹⁰⁵ And while none of *Preacher*’s individual issues ranked among the top 100 best-selling annual comics during its five years of publication, in 1999 three *Preacher* trade paperbacks (volumes 1, 5, and 6) were amongst the year’s top twenty-five best-selling graphic novels, and in 2000 every published *Preacher* trade paperback was ranked with in the top 50 of the year’s best-selling graphic novels.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, *Preacher #2* (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1995), 11.

¹⁰³ Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, *Preacher #6* (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1995), 25.

¹⁰⁴ Diamond Comic Distributors Inc., *February 1995 Comic Book Sales Rankings*, Sales Report (Timonium, MD: Diamond Comic Distributors, February 1995).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Diamond Comic Distributors Inc., *1999 Annual Comic Book Sales Figures*, Yearly Sales Report (Timonium, MD: Diamond Comic Distributors, January 2000); Diamond Comic Distributors Inc., *2000 Annual Comic Book Sales Figures*, Yearly Sales Report (Timonium, MD: Diamond Comic Distributors, January 2001). In 2000 Diamond Comic Distributors expanded its annual report of graphic novel sales

Transmetropolitan never sold as well as *Preacher*, averaging 17,586 copies per month over the course of its five-year publication run and never reaching higher than 21,000 copies.¹⁰⁷ The low sales numbers initially led Ellis to fear for the title's future. "First issue's sold fuck all. We're doomed," Ellis confided to his good friend Garth Ennis after initial sales reports came in, "Sales always fall on issue two. We're doomed."¹⁰⁸ However, sales did not dip substantially and the series continued through its full planned sixty-issue run. In fact, sales of *Transmetropolitan*'s trade paperbacks outsold its periodical releases, each bound volume appeared on Diamond Distributor's top selling 100 graphic novels between 2001 and 2004. In 2006 *Transmetropolitan* trade paperback sales again spiked when volume one appeared on Diamond's top sales list five years after its initial release.¹⁰⁹ Scholar Patrick Meaney attributed *Transmetropolitan*'s longevity in sales to its ability to serve as a long lasting political allegory. Like any good allegory *Transmetropolitan* could be read as valid by both the politically liberal and conservative. "*Transmetropolitan*," Meaney asserted, "is in general more about ideas than addressing specific policy or political strategy, so it will remain relevant and applicable to the current condition far into the future."¹¹⁰

Preacher and *Transmetropolitan* also had an unintended but undoubtedly much appreciated effect on Vertigo as a publisher. The mature themes of Ennis and Ellis's

from the top 25 to the top 100 due to the increased popularity of the trade paperback format. *Preacher: Alamo*, the 9th and final volume of *Preacher* was not published until 2001, however, it was ranked number 3 in 2001's best-selling trade paperbacks according to Diamond's "2001 Annual Comic Book Sales Figures."

¹⁰⁷ Diamond Comic Distributors Inc., *March 1995 Comic Book Sales Rankings*, Sales Report (Timonium, MD: Diamond Comic Distributors, March 1995).

¹⁰⁸ Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson, *Transmetropolitan: Back on the Street*, vol. 1, Trade Paperback (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 1998), 2.

¹⁰⁹ Diamond Comic Distributors Inc., *2001 Annual Comic Book Sales Figures*, Yearly Sales Report (Timonium, MD: Diamond Comic Distributors, January 2002).

¹¹⁰ Patrick Meaney, "Two Tugs of a Dead Dog's Cock About Truthiness: *Transmetropolitan* and 21st Century Politics," in *Shot in the Face: a Savage Journey into the Heart of Transmetropolitan*, Manuscript (Moro, IL: Sequart Research and Literacy Organization, 2012), 76–77.

scripts title attracted the holy grail of comics readership, women. In a trend that began with *Sandman*, *Preacher* and *Transmetropolitan* were wildly popular with adult female audiences. *Preacher*, despite being what Julia Round called “a big kind of cocks-out, arm-waving, gun-toting” story, proved popular amongst adult females. Karen Berger attributes such gender biased popularity to the power of Ennis’ writing, specifically the portrayal of Tulips as a strong and capable female character along with the “the ups and downs and... the emotion and the love and the passion” found in the relationship between Custer and Tulip.¹¹¹ Conversely, *Transmetropolitan* lacked a traditional relationship story arc, which in and of itself may have enticed women to read the title. However, Ellis’s fictional world was heavily populated with women. According to literary critic Greg Burgas, “[i]n the often depressingly sexist world of comics, the women of *Transmetropolitan* stand as exemplars of characters that can go toe-to-toe with any male character.”¹¹² Thus, female readers were drawn to the several strong female leads found in Ellis’ scripts.¹¹³ *Preacher* and *Transmetropolitan*, more so than other post *Sandman* comics, maintained the creative values upon which Vertigo was founded and thus the a readership that had come to expect and respect the imprint’s socio-political irreverence. Ultimately, these two titles allowed Vertigo to thrive where other comic mainstream, alternative, and independent publishers were floundering and helped positively position the imprint in the marketplace as the industry began to recuperate from the speculation bubble in 2000.

¹¹¹ Berger, Karen Berger Interview by Julia Round (PhD).

¹¹² Greg Burgas, “Supporting Players: Women in *Transmetropolitan*,” in *Shot in the Face: a Savage Journey into the Heart of Transmetropolitan*, Manuscript (Moro, IL: Sequart Research and Literacy Organization, 2012), 22.

¹¹³ Patrick Meaney, *Warren Ellis: Captured Ghosts*, DVD, Documentary (Halo 8 Entertainment, 2012).

Epilogue/Conclusion

Ennis and Ellis pushed the envelope of comics, critiquing, often with vitriol, the sacred institutions of American religion, myth, and democracy. Both *Preacher* and *Transmetropolitan* pushed their critiques with an irreverence that had previously, even by Vertigo's standards, be inconceivable in mainstream comics. Yet, for all their subjective insolence, absurdity, sexuality, vulgarity, and violence, Ennis and Ellis crafted scripts that treated their readers as adults and placed before them significant and challenging social issues not found in mainstream superhero comics. In many ways these two writers and their respective works mark a departure for Vertigo. *Preacher's* critique of religion and God along with *Transmetropolitan's* acerbic attack of the American political system resulted in DC Comics watching the content of the two series "like a frigging hawk."¹

While still scripting *Transmetropolitan* in 1999, Ellis also took on writing duties for *Hellblazer* beginning with its one hundred and thirty-fourth issue. Ellis's run on *Hellblazer* marked the only instance in which Vertigo censored one of their creators. "Years ago," Ellis recalled in 2010,

I wrote a brief run on the DC Vertigo horror comic *John Constantine: Hellblazer*. Brief, because I wrote a horror story therein called "Shoot". "Shoot" was about schoolyard slayings in the United States. It was completed before Columbine happened, but scheduled to appear not long after. The regime at DC Comics at the time decided that it could not be released in its completed form. I refused to go along with the changes they wanted to make. They decided not to publish the book at all... I remember that, at the time, someone telling me that the stance was that Paul Levitz would not release the book so long as he was running DC.²

¹ Hutchins and Ellison, "Warren Ellis: The Wizard Q & A," 46.

² Warren Ellis, "Shoot to Finally Be Published," *Warren Ellis*, July 16, 2010, warrenellis.com.

Ellis quit the series and focused solely on *Transmetropolitan*, which he used to voice his opinion regarding the censoring of “Shoot.” In *Transmetropolitan: I Hate it Here*, published in 2000, Ellis proclaimed through Jerusalem’s dialogue, “The vengeful God of the Old Testament flowed in my veins, giving me the power, hate and an erection of uncommon savagery... No fucker rewrites me.”³ It was little surprise then that the disgruntled Ellis left Vertigo for Marvel and superhero comics when *Transmetropolitan* ended its publication run in November 2002.⁴ It took Ellis more than a decade to contract with Vertigo again.

In the miasma of mediocrity that characterized DC and Marvel’s mainstream publications during the market downturn, the British creators at Vertigo had risen to prominence within the industry and the often fickle comic book fan base. As the industry rose from the ashes of the speculation bubble the British creators of Vertigo were courted with promises of money by the ‘big two’ and thus many of the imprint’s British talent followed in Ellis’s footsteps. To varying degrees all of the British Vertigo writers began scripting superhero comics for Vertigo’s parent company or its biggest competitor, Marvel. Morrison went to draft scripts for *Batman*, *Superman*, and *Justice League of America*; Ennis and Ellis did extensive script work for Marvel, drafting scripts for the company’s *Punisher*, *Spider-Man*, *Ghost Rider*, and *X-Men* titles. Ennis also wrote *Crossed #0-9* for Avatar Press, a small independent publisher. Milligan and Delano also contracted, though to a lesser extent, their talents out to other publishing houses.

³ Warren Ellis, Darick Robertson, and Rodney Ramos, *Transmetropolitan: Tales of Human Waste*, Trade Paperback (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 2000), 24. The story was eventually printed in 2010 in the first issue of a series titled *Vertigo Resurrected*.

⁴ Vertigo and Ellis published *Orbiter*, a one-off graphic novel in 2003. Although Ellis had already left the company, he had complete and contracted the book to Vertigo.

With the industry recovering and sales picking up it was little wonder that the now-established British writers sought the larger exposure and paycheck that came with superhero comics. However, that they still returned to Vertigo to publish scripts that companies like DC and Marvel were unwilling to print indicates that Vertigo's peculiar position as an alternative press was concrete. Under the Vertigo banner Morrison published a thirteen-issue mini-series, *The Filth*, a bizarre superhero title.⁵ Ennis, a fan of military narratives, returned to Vertigo on occasion to publish short tales in *War Stories*, a semi-annual anthology publication.⁶ Milligan split his writing between Marvel's superhero books and two exceptional crime-genre works for Vertigo, *Greek Street* and *A Bronx Kill*, both of which were released in 2010.⁷ Delano reduced his writing workload but released the short lived but critically acclaimed *Outlaw Nation*, a brutal and uncharacteristically unromantic story taking place along America's nineteenth century Western frontier.⁸ Even the previously perturbed Warren Ellis signed a contract to publish *Stealth Tribes*, a one-off gritty science fiction graphic novel illustrated by Coleen Doran, released under the Vertigo imprint in 2013.⁹ Paradoxically, with their newfound fame and pull within the industry, the Brits regularly returned to Vertigo to publish the titles DC and Marvel were disinclined to take to press.

⁵ Grant Morrison, Chris Weston, and Gary Erskine, *The Filth*, vol. #1-#13 (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, August 2002-October 2003).

⁶ Garth Ennis and Jim Lee, "Nosh and Barry and Eddie and Joe," in *Weird War Tales*, vol. #1, Special (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 2003); Garth Ennis et al., *War Story*, vol. #1-#3, 2 (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 2003).

⁷ Peter Milligan and Davide Gianfelice, *Greek Street #1-16*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, September 2009 - October 2010); Peter Milligan and James Romberger, *The Bronx Kill* (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, 2010).

⁸ Jamie Delano and Goran Sudzuka, *Outlaw Nation*, vol. #1-#19 (New York: DC Comics/Vertigo, November 2000 - May 2002). *Outlaw Nation*, despite generally positive feedback from critics, was prematurely cancelled due to low sales numbers.

⁹ David Adam, "The Dark Star," *The Guardian*, August 26, 2004, Online edition, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2004/aug/26/sciencefictionspecial4>.

Karen Berger has since given up her position as Vertigo's executive editor, and left the company in March 2013 after overseeing the transition to Shelley Bond, a long time line editor for the imprint.¹⁰ In a widely circulated press release Berger wrote,

I've been incredibly proud to have provided a home where writers and artists could create progressive and provocative stories that broadened the scope of comics, attracting a new and diverse readership to graphic storytelling. I'd like to thank all the many immensely talented creators who have helped make Vertigo into a daring and distinctive imprint and I'm grateful to everyone at DC Entertainment and the retail community for their support and commitment to Vertigo all these years. It's been quite an honor.¹¹

Berger's sense of honor then, was not likely meant as hyperbole or a device to placate disappointed fans or assuage worries of stockholders. Over Berger's two decade long stewardship of Vertigo the imprint introduced an astounding three hundred new titles to the annals of comic book publishing history.¹² In very real and tangible ways the creators and executives of Vertigo and DC Comics were not only keenly responsible for the maturation of the medium but also created an association between British writers and the Vertigo imprint that was synonymous with complex and mature comic books. The imprint, however, did not survive solely on the periodic contributions of its former scriptwriters, "The influx of British talent to U.S. comics publishers paved the way for a fertile exchange of ideas, techniques and approaches that went beyond a simple notion of national influences."¹³

Young Americans, influenced by the popular British creations of the mid-1980s and 1990s, had been tapped by Karen Berger to keep the imprint viable in the post-crash

¹⁰ Alex Widen, "DC Comics News 12/20/12: Vertigo's New Editorial Team and DC Animation Updates," *Examiner*, December 20, 2012, <http://www.examiner.com/article/dc-comics-news-12-20-12-vertigo-s-new-editorial-team-and-dc-animation-updates>.

¹¹ "Karen Berger Steps Down as Vertigo Executive Editor, SVP," *Comic Book Resources*, December 3, 2012, <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=42478>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Little, "2000AD: Understanding the 'British Invasion' of American Comics," 141.

marketplace. As the Brits left, young and daring American writers entered the ranks of Vertigo and in many ways matched the creativity and rebelliousness of their UK progenitors. Brian K. Vaughn's superb *Y the Last Man*, Brian Azzarello's gritty noir *100 Bullets*, Jason Aaron's moving but historically revisionist *Scalped*, and Brian Wood's intricately political *DMZ*, to name just a few, have proven to be just as popular and complex as, with the exception of *Sandman*, the British written comics. What had started as a British invasion, that is to say the *Britishization* of American comics at DC/Vertigo, became a near industry-wide standard of storytelling as publishers, recognizing the contribution of mature content to the salability and longevity of the medium, emerged from the market collapse. American writers and artists incorporated stories, structures, and subjects that had been popularized by the Brits; grittier tones, more nuanced narrative structures, and relevant socio-political contexts were woven into even the most tame superhero comics. However, as with all cultural exchanges, the Britishness of American comic books was not static, but coopted and embellished by up-and-coming domestic writers to fit creative personalities, changing consumer demands, and publisher mandates. However, the key elements of the British invasion that, in a little over a decade, led to a rapid proliferation of complex narratives in mainstream comics remained intact.

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