Odsjek za anglistiku

Filozofski fakultet

Sveučilište u Zagrebu

DIPLOMSKI RAD

American Serial Graphic Narrative

(Smjer: Američka književnost i kultura)

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Ak. godina: 2016./2017.

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1. Introduction: Comics, Superheroes, and Their Cultural and Economic Practices and Values

In this paper my goal is to systematically shed light on the medium of comics and its place within the popular and mass cultural space of the United States. I am, to put it that way, not interested in the comics' content in particular. I'm interested in the form of comics in an economic sense. In how they define, negotiate, and shape their cultural and commercial spaces. To achieve this I will cover a range of topics starting with the definition of the medium of comics and the significance of one of its elements – the gutter, the space between images. To lay the groundwork for further discussion, I will discuss the figure of the superhero. The superhero is the dominant *product* of the comics industry. Its dominance is derived from economic success, and the economy drives the comics industry and shapes all its practices and aspects like those of creation or distribution. My analysis will show how these elements function and how they are interconnected.

Comics are a young medium with a short history, and even though American comics have such classifications as for example Golden Age or Silver Age, my intent is to take a contemporary approach to the topic and avoid historiographic involvement where possible. In achieving such a comprehensive overview of a particular medium and its meaning within American culture I have found certain titles' guidance essential. Principally, Thierry Groensteen's books *The System of Comics* and its, to call it that way, sequel *Comics and Narration* are indispensable when

dealing with the purely theoretical part of comics as a medium. Semiotics define the systematic approach to signs and codes in the dominant visual nature of comics. Additionally, Groensteen's definitions are fundamentally 'comics narratology.' *Capitalist Superheroes* by Dan Hassler-Forest is a book that deals with the themes in superhero film adaptations, but is enlightening in describing the ways capitalism functions though entertainment culture. Film is on a larger scale than comics and the comics industry; however, relying on critical theory the book provides an easily applicable referential framework through a complex post-structuralist analysis of the workings of neoliberal capital and globalization and the ideologies behind them. Douglas Wolk's *Reading Comics* and Grant Morrison's *Supergods* provide insightful information both historically and creatively, and both are written from a more pop-cultural perspective, while Jean-Paul Gabilliet's expansive *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* covers a huge amount of topics through a variety of approaches, and provides a detailed interdisciplinary account, dominantly resting on historiography and sociology, of comics in the United States. Finally, Ramzi Fawaz's *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* is an inspiring book that reimagines the site of mainstream comics, their potential and their meanings. In a number of case studies through the mainstream medium's history it applies queer theory, and focuses on the intersectionality of comics' identity politics, namely the Other(ness) of its protagonists.

However, before delving into the complex matter, it is important to make a note on terminology just for the sake of clarity. I mostly use the word 'comics' as a medium, which is, however, also often interchangeable with the plural form of 'comic book'. On the other hand, *a comic book* denotes the physical manifestation of the medium, in this case usually a printed stapled pamphlet (in other words: *an issue*)

which consists of thirty two pages, twenty or more with the comic book's content, other pages include ads and front and back covers, published under a common title, e.g. *The Uncanny X-Men*. Wolk states that "the cheap way of referring to them is 'comics' or 'comic books'; the fancy way is 'graphic novels' (or 'graphic narratives' or 'sequential art')," but he goes on to explain that he "tends to use 'comics,' because it's the word that people who actually make them use among themselves. The industry calls thin, saddle-stitched pamphlets 'comic books' (or, more jokingly, 'floppies' or 'periodicals') (61). I will not be making a value judgment about whether calling the medium this or that is cheap or fancy, or the implications Wolk's writing might have, because Groensteen states that "comics has undergone a process of rehabilitation, and its cultural legitimacy is now more securely established – while the very notions of high art and low art have become diluted by the rise of the entertainment culture" (*Comics and Narration* 166). But it is important for me to somewhat distance myself from the term graphic novel. "*Graphic narrative* designates a book-length work composed in the medium of comics. While the much more common term *graphic novel* has been gaining momentum as a publishing label since the 1980s" (Chute 3). I agree with Chute about the term being a publishing label intent on marketing the product/medium to a wider audience. Any kind of collected comics work can afterwards, as is a common practice among mainstream comics publishers, be called a graphic novel, whether its content is original or previously published in pamphlet form. But I would also like to make sure here that in my usage I have expanded her term 'graphic narrative' to a work of *any length* composed in the medium of comics. Thus, the term graphic novel is in its essence an economic label, and its importance is such, albeit its appearance and widespread use has benefitted the whole medium, as Hassler-Forest clarifies: "Although this industry

move was a strategic development intended to expand the medium's market, and therefore its profitability, one of the results was a renegotiation of the comic book's relative position within the cultural hierarchy" (*Superheroes* 46).

The American comics, or its produced physical unit – *a* comic book, is itself inseparable from the market as a larger whole. The intellectual property, generally owned by media conglomerates, becomes a moldable cross-media platform for the production of *branded* text. Wolk also labels them 'mainstream comics' defining them as "genre-based and almost always serialized as monthly or quasi-monthly pamphlets, and they're generally written and drawn by different people – sometimes by mid-sized committees. They're story-driven and series-based, so there are always more stories to tell; they rely partly on readers' attachment to certain characters or franchises" (27). Firstly, mainstream comics is a term I embrace here. Secondly, in discussing comics, as narrative content or text, the approach again should not be defined only by the content itself but by the larger picture. And Hassler-Forest, even though the focus of his book is on film, "offers one particular way of understanding these texts, based on the historical-materialist point of view that their meaning is ultimately determined by the economic systems of which they are the product" (*Superheroes* 8). Therefore, comics are shaped by the time and economy of when they were produced. A typical monthly publishing schedule grants flexibility to a comic book title to interact with its surroundings on a micro scale (be it its publishing date, other media, news, readership, and often opening it to an additional meta-level approach to reading), making the medium's narrative appear malleably current and relevant, albeit habitually connected to corporate synergy. Nevertheless, apart from the origin of the brand and intellectual property, comics benefit, unlike other media

their characters and stories have crossed into, from a wider and freer range of expression:

> The original *Star Wars* franchise (1977-1983) had demonstrated with overwhelming force that the proceeds from ancillary products like toys, T-shirts, and video games could be far more profitable than the films they were organized around. This particular way of transforming a narrative property into a brand that could be successfully deployed across a wide variety of platforms was bolstered further by the neoliberal turn in the 1980s, as the decade's wave of corporate mergers resulted in the swift vertical and horizontal integration of media and entertainment businesses. (Hassler-Forest, *Superheroes* 80)

The illustration with *Star Wars* here can be substituted with any other film or franchise (or an animated TV series). And that text makes for the monolithic message from which a wide variety of ancillary products appear, and the existence of which erases the possibility of creative deviations because of its, to put it that way, serious economic obligations. On the other hand, comics titles have the freedom to vary in style, substance, and tone from issue to issue, and lack budgetary constraints related to such variations in production, which makes them a medium and platform for experimenting, and worth analyzing.

I will begin by discussing the very medium of comics focusing on its elements and definitions. I will specifically focus on the term of the gutter – the so called empty space between two panels. The gutter will, in reflecting the comics medium, point towards a wider understanding of American mainstream comics industry, and its practices. Next, I will discuss the figure of the superhero. Superheroes are the most

recognizable product of American mainstream comics since their conception. Their continuing popularity has them often confused with genre. This they are not, but I will show what superheroes represent and how they relate to us, both readers and human beings. From there I will move on to describe the comic book industry and illustrate how it operates within the totality of the comics market. I will enumerate and describe a number of its common practices thereby uncovering its close workings in connection with what neoliberal capitalism represents. Expanding this picture of the comic book industry into the creators of comics, like artists and writers, I will touch upon the history of creative labor and what it meant for the produced comics themselves. Lastly, I will also tackle the notably specific way of distributing comics and how comics depend on creating a community, through readers and specialized shops. I will mention a series of longstanding problems that have afflicted the industry since its beginnings – those of gender and race both in comics representation on the page and among the industry's workforce, not only the creative laborers.

2. The Medium and the Gutter

In my attempt at painting the totality of the multifaceted medium of comics in the U.S. it will be best to start small and theoretically. In defining comics it is not possible to settle on one definition, and particularly a simple one at that. "Comics scholarship remains, it seems, forever surprised by the sin of *not choosing*," writes Gardner, "but it is precisely the inability or refusal to choose (between text and image, past and present, graphic and novel, popular culture and art/literature, etc) that draws creators to this form in the first place" (177). This *not choosing* makes the liminality

and the space in-between actually an important part of comics. At the same time there's unity between the elements, and division.

There are certain elements of comics that are almost always present, and since my focus is on the mainstream comics, it makes naming and defining these elements much easier, because theoretically uncertain or indeterminate manifestations are scarce or completely eliminated. When Wolk states that "French critics sometimes refer to comics as the 'ninth art' […] giving comics-the-art a number is useful, because it suggests that it requires a vocabulary of its own to discuss and evaluate" (14-15), he is definitely right. Comics has certain elements it shares with literature and film, and I or someone else might call upon those in an argument, but nevertheless comics is its own medium. In this way we can name the page, the panel, the balloon, and most importantly, as will be shown, the gutter. If we consider it historically:

> Europe also knew these two formulas: the one (linear) of the strip, and the other (tabular), of the page. However, since the principal publishing format of the comics on the Old Continent was not the daily press, but specialized magazines […], it is natural that the page was immediately imposed as the unit of refrence. […] The strips unite the panels; the page, in its turn, unites the strips. (Groensteen, *System* 58)

The strip today plays a minimal role and can be left out in a more contemporary view, because a page layout does not have to follow a strict structure of spatially horizontal linearity, due to historical formal experimentation and technological advancement in production. But the page remains important as it unites all or most of the other elements. Within a page we will find one or more panels. A panel usually represents

one image. It can have a visible frame, or a nonexistent one, but a border to a panel is always implied because customarily another panel follows. Another note must be taken into account, because the panel and frame can often mean the same thing or be interchangeable terms, but to make it simple in my usage the panel is the surface, while the frame is the border of that surface. Postema defines the link between panels as such:

> The particularity of the moment portrayed in individual panels encodes narrativity: the moment that is shown is unfinished. It asserts itself as a fragment of a larger whole. This whole is a continuing narrative, no matter how simple. As a result, one panel inevitably creates a pull to surrounding images in order to fulfill the narrative potential of the single comics image. (13)

Thus, with the relation of certain elements to other elements, of the same order, and eventually of a larger whole, we construct meaning. Which leads us to what Groensteen claims is "the central element of comics, the first criteria in the foundational order, […] *iconic solidarity*," (*System* 18). In other words "the co-presence of images is a key ingredient to the comics form, and one important aspect of iconic solidarity is that images are separated from one another (18). The other aspect is that the images, although separate from one another, also exist together on the page, on *in praesentia"* (Postema 46). Defining individual elements serves no concrete purpose, and as Groensteen himself says, his "theory was macrosemiotic in its scope: it was not concerned with the details of single images, but with the articulation of images within the space of the page and across that of the book as a whole" (*Comics and Narration* 3).

After the page and the panel come the balloons – primary containers of written text in comics. They manifest themselves either as dialogue or as narrative captions, objective or subjective in nature. The balloon is mostly circular, and the caption is mostly rectangular, but both serve the same purpose, and their shapes depend on the lettering style used in a comic. Spread throughout a comic there can be a lot of balloons or just a few, depending on the amount of text, and there can, of course, be none. There is no prescribed frequency. Balloons themselves are tied to panels, and as Groensteen notes "in a hierarchy of spaces, the balloon is […] subordinated to the panel because the panel can proceed without the balloon while the balloon necessarily implies the panel" (Groensteen, *System* 68). There is another important feature of the balloon: "The form, the number, and the location of the word balloons (*bulles*), in sum, the network that they create within the hyperframe, also regulate the management of space, and contribute in a determining fashion to directing the gaze of the reader" (Groensteen, *System* 67). Within the page it is important to create a readable whole that follows a natural progression of the eye over it. As we read printed text left to right, it is important that the balloons, not the textual content inside them, follow a similar progression. Groensteen's abovementioned "management of space" also implies carefully thought-out layout within a panel, which includes the image and the balloon(s), and the same within a page. Naming these elements, except the gutter for now, serves the purpose defining properties of comics, and a comic book:

> Within the paged multiframe that constitutes a complete comic, every
> panel exists, potentially if not actually, in relation with each of the
> others. This totality, where the physical form is generally, according to
> French editorial norms, that of an album, responds to a model of

> organization that is not that of the strip nor that of the chain, but that of the *network*. (Groensteen, *System* 146)

A (comic book) issue would here be the term and corresponding physical form to supplant the European or Groensteen's term of the album. Now, after laying some groundwork, we can imagine this network on a larger, and less theoretically abstract, scale. A network of issues, a network of titles, a network of narrative universes. Where each and every of them, to repeat Groensteen's words, "exists, potentially if not actually, in relation with each of the other," that is the predominant and complex state of the comic book industry, within American mainstream comics. To expand on this point, I will move on and explain the term of the gutter first.

As the page has its margins, so does the panel – it is usually called a gutter. Being the white space between panels, "gutters are easily overlooked and meant to be so, like the spaces between words" (Postema 50). However, in comics almost everything hinges on both this physical and implied space of demarcation. It is there because it has to be, and because it is purposefully put there. I have mostly talked about space, because pages, panels, and balloons, can be situated that way. But with the gutter, which is again defined spatially, but does not specifically have to be defined by a blank space and take up more of it than a mere line separating two panels (or rather those panels are sharing a frame), another dimension of comics comes into play – time. **"**Comics is an art of space and an art of time," claims Groensteen and emphasizes that "these dimensions are indissociable" (*Comics and Narration* 12). The gutter is also where the, so to define, collaborative nature of comics comes into play. Not collaborative in terms of creation, as we'll see when we come to define the process of creation of mainstream American comics, but

collaborative in terms of the relationship between the creators and the readers,

between a comic and a reader's act of reading it:

> We use [the term 'gutter'] to designate 'that-which-is-not-represented-
> but-which-the-reader-cannot-help-but-to-infer.' It is therefore a virtual,
> and take note that this virtual is not abandoned to the fantasy of each
> reader: it is a forced virtual, an identifiable absence. The gutter is simply
> the symbolic site of its absence. More than a zone on the paper, it is the
> interior screen on which every reader projects the missing image (or
> images). (Groensteen, *System* 112-113)

The gutter, therefore, implies. It implies a connection between two panels. It implies

the passage of time. It implies a sequence. But the reader is the one making these

connections. "The reader spontaneously converts the inter-iconic space into a

temporal interval. S/he makes the supposition that succession in space (between two

panels positioned one after the other) indicates succession in time" (Groensteen,

Comics and Narration 36-37). What is here above called the 'inter-iconic space,'

Postema, in her similar theoretical postulate, more simply just calls 'the gap:'

> With the gutter, the gap becomes literally visible on the comics page.
> The gutters isolate and juxtapose the panels, requesting attention for
> each one. […] By separating and defining individual units (the comics
> panels), gutters allow these panels to articulate meaning in contrast and
> in response to one another, creating the conditions for inter-
> referentiality between panels. (Postema 50)

Gutters, then, create meaning. By isolating they bring together. By standing in

between panels they articulate fragments of a narrative into larger units or a whole

that in this produced continuity makes sense. "In order to achieve this synthesis of the individual elements, the comics form relies on the force of absences, of the *gap*" (Postema xiii). By seeing the usage of the verb 'rely,' we can understand the overall importance of the gutter in comics and confirm that "the gutter is not an abdication of narrative authority, but instead the application of a different narrative tool" (Thomas 160).

Further on the topic of the gutter, I'll discuss some additional claims made by both Postema and Groensteen to expand the theoretical frame a bit. They have both described the gutter in terms of something missing, calling *the elision* "denoted by the blank space of the gutter […] so instrumental to the functioning of the sequence," or naming *the ellipsis* as "the basis of the discontinuous language of comics" (Postema 48; Groensteen, *System* 132). The gutter is always present in its invisibility. In deciphering the act of reading comics, Postema claims that "comics call for a process of retroactive resignification, where one must continually loop back to reconsider meanings and make new meanings as one goes forward in the text" (Postema 50). Thus, what Postema lays out, can be repeated in other words that "the co-occurrence of panels within the multiframe, their simultaneous presence under the eye of the reader, and also the visibility of the intervals between these panels, […] the locations where their symbolic articulation is carried out, function so that we are naturally inclined to credit narration to the sequence" (Groensteen, *System* 105). The panels of a story shown and told exist on the page at the same time, but the linearity is created by the reader, and recreated after that as the scope and amount of panels grow. In similar fashion, both agree that "the gaps in the comics continuously ask to be filled," and "that meaning is, for each reader, always to be constructed and to be completed" (Postema 125; Groensteen, *System* 160). But this construction and completion of

meaning, as Groensteen expands, is never final: "Like all narrative works (deployed in time), a comic is governed by the principle of *differance* (delay): its signification is constructed solely on the terms of the reader – freed afterward to the interpretation deepened by the research of meaning that knows no definitive limit" (*System* 111). Always different, and constantly postponed, the meaning of comics is defined with precision by Derrida's term differance, and it applies exquisitely to American mainstream comics here. There is no one definitive way to read and understand decades of stories about same characters. The meaning is ever-shifting, and permanently elusive. At the same time, these stories are constantly progressing, and continually staying in one place and being retold. It is the time, the history around them, both diachronically and synchronically, that is constantly renegotiating their meaning.

Taking into account all of the above, this is where the role of the gutter is expanded. Because the gutter does not have to be located only on the page. In his detailed taxonomy of comics terms Groensteen goes on to describe the gutter variants as "the sigh (that is, for us, the between-images), the semi-pause (the between-strips), the pause (the between-pages)" (Groensteen, *System* 60). We see how the gutter physically expands to between two pages, either between the verso and the recto side by side, or from the recto to the verso which we reach by turning the page. Thus, in the same manner, it comes naturally to expand it further – into the gap between issues. As mainstream comics are serial in nature, the narrative nowadays progresses from issue to issue, therefore the gutter expands to the space between issues. The space between issues is highly malleable; it is as the word 'space' itself might denote – an unoccupied, ever-expanding area, pregnant with and void of meaning. It can be of no coincidence then, that collective groups of titles

under the same publisher are often denoted by the term 'universe,' like Marvel Universe or DC Universe. And even though Gardner writes about collectors of comic books in the following cited passage, he nevertheless makes a few succinct points about the gutter:

> The desire to possess comics – to hunt down every stray work by a favorite creator, to contain and reassemble the scattered pieces of a fragmentary comics universe – is a familiar one for many readers (and one that has little, if anything, to do with fantasies about market value). It is the compulsive need to fill in the gaps, to make connections between issues (*the serial gap inherent to comic book production, mirroring and complicating the gaps between the frames themselves*) that drives the collector in search of missing issues. Indeed, the archival drive that has been a vital aspect of comic book culture since the 1980s can be read as a metaphor for the (always uneasy) collaboration between reader and writer that is central to the comics form. (173, emphasis mine)

The narrative is playing upon our desire as readers to decipher it, and not just to make sense of it, but also to complete it. The most important point above is made in a parenthesis. The collectors are not that vital (to me and in this paper, at least), they are a byproduct of this niche market and its foibles I dare say. However, this also broaches the subject of the comics industry's complex relationship with its audience, be they collectors or not, to which I will return.

Thus, when Groensteen writes that "the 'gutter' between the two panels is therefore not the seat of a virtual image; it is a site of semantic articulation, a logical

conversion, that of a series of utterables (the panels) in a statement that is unique and coherent (the story)," how do we then define the more abstract phenomenon of the gutter between two issues (*System* 114)? Well, if going back to Thomas's definition of the gutter as an *application of a different narrative tool* makes sense, then the gutter between issues is again an application of that same tool, or one similar to it; however its articulation cannot be only semantic. Completing a story here gains an additional dimension, as the reader returns to the same title the following month or months, s/he has to purchase each next issue – this expanded gutter becomes a place of economic articulation.

I would also argue that comic book titles, or comic book brands they exist as now, are themselves a manifestation of the gutter. A comic book issue defines "the text's status as a branded commercial commodity" (Hassler-Forest, *Superheroes* 260). However, the very brand itself is devoid of content. For instance Batman, as a corporately owned intellectual property, is itself essentially a gap filled with or commodified by the production of comic book titles he populates as a character in the narratives unfolding as content in these titles' issues. It goes without saying that media conglomerates, which have owned comics publishing giants for decades now, approach their property through marketing and market research where the recognition of their brand becomes another gutter, and another tool. Hassler-Forest puts this within a wider framework:

> On the one hand, the commercial success and sustained appeal of
> characters like Batman, Superman and Spider-Man can be related to
> their iconic status as pop-cultural figures that are instantly recognizable
> to millions of consumers around the world. In a fully globalized cultural
> economy, it obviously makes sense for multimedia conglomerates to

invest in recognizable and marketable brands that appeal to multiple

audiences and fit easily into multiple paradigms, such as the summer

blockbuster movie, role-playing games, toy production, etc.

(*Superheroes* 5)

Therefore, by entering a particular manifestation of the character-brand in the form of

comics within a "narrative franchise" with the act of reading, the reader temporarily

fills the gaps and brings at least a certain amount of closure to them. It is also not

only about visual recognition. The broad strokes of Batman's story are nowadays

familiar to largely everyone, they exist as in the endless gutter of human imagination,

the collective consciousness, and it is up to the physical product of a comic book to,

in a sense, validate that story, or an element of it, and provide an amount of gap-

filling or closure which is and can never be final or completed in the end.

3. The Figure of the Superhero

The most recognizable product of American comics, somewhat to the

detriment of the whole medium, is the superhero. "There's no way of getting around

it: if you're going to look honestly at American comics, you're going to encounter

superheroes," states Wolk (89). What is, then, a superhero? It is at the same time

easy and difficult to define what a superhero is. Because to define it by naming

shared characteristics and components, and creating an archetypal matrix is to

ignore its diachronic development. Therefore, my approach will be both synchronic

and historical. When Gabilliet claims that "installed in American popular culture since

the end of the 1930s, superheroes have become the indigenous genre par

excellence of comic books," he unfortunately creates a bit of a confusion in

classification (309). Superheroes are not a genre; strictly speaking they *could* be a genre, but they are an amalgam of genres. Addressing a similar issue in defining superheroes, Hassler-Forest states that he "instead, approaches the figure [of the superhero] as flexible and adaptable figure who serves to unite a diverse group of texts that are extremely diverse, but which do demonstrate certain common tendencies that allows us to group them roughly together" (*Superheroes* 6). It makes sense, then, to call it a genre within a wider frame which operates with a larger number of genres, for instance in the movie industry like Hassler-Forest does above. However, he also proceeds to state that "the superhero film can indeed be identified as 'post-genre,' freely mixing and matching from established generic frameworks as diverse as horror, romantic comedy, action, epic, fantasy, and science fiction, often within a single film" (Hassler-Forest, *Superheroes* 200). It goes on to say that, in a similar manner, on the superhero's home turf, in the comics industry, the figure is so dominant that it as a genre distinction makes little sense. There the superhero is a 'post-genre' malleable platform on which genres manifest and coalesce. To illustrate, Batman is often darker in tone, gravitating towards crime-noir and horror in its genre, but can of course take on a whole other range of genres, depending on who is producing/creating this Batman product, what its targeted audience is, and what the market demands are at that point in time. Also, "in order to use the term productively, we must therefore first acknowledge that genre is not so much a classificatory tool as it is a way of grouping diverse texts together, frequently in order to increase their commodity value" (Hassler-Forest, *Superheroes* 7).

Apart from grouping superheroes as a genre, a superhero is defined not by what it is, but by what it represents. I keep using the pronoun *it* to depersonalize the figure and the notions of the superhero, and to make it purely theoretical. The

definitions and origins of superheroes, and the sets of powers that defined them as such, changed over time, of course. In the most basic of descriptions or definitions, Fawaz states that:

> Superheroes possessed an unprecedented capacity to extend their bodies into space and manipulate the material world with physical powers […] that mimicked the capacities of modern industrial technologies. […] Unlike the frontier hero escaping the constraints of civilization, the modern superhero is an embodiment of the *synthesis* between the seemingly "natural" biological self and the technologies of the industrial society. (6)

It is their ability to overcome the limits of the human physical body, and renegotiate the space and time it exists in that defines superheroes.

> The individual's inability to navigate this metropolitan maze gives rise to a fundamental sense of anxiety that partially reflects the decentering 'crisis of postmodernity' and its alienating effects on the individual. The superhero figure's defining characteristic is his power to transcend this situation […]. One productive way of reading the superhero's enduring popularity as an icon of the modern cityscape is therefore as the embodiment of this public anxiety concerning the individual's position within that urban environment: 'through the superhero, we gain a freedom of movement not constrained by the ground-level order imposed by the urban grid' (Bukatman 188). (Hassler-Forest, *Superheroes* 134)

Physically overpowered, the individual body finds comfort and reorientation through superheroes. It is then no coincidence that the superhero's general habitat is the urban jungle, the metropolis, the complex hive of contemporary human existence, and the superhero's powers work as a balm with which to successfully navigate that life with ease. The proliferation of superhero characters provides the possibility to analyze each of them individually and in detail, of course, to see how and in which way they fit into the whole, and making further distinctions and grouping them. The superhero is also superior in another way:

> The superhero's extraordinary ability to transcend the limitations of everyday life also functions as the phantasmal escape from 'capitalist realism […]. The superhero's powers, which consist either of supernatural physical abilities (Superman, Spider-Man) or of a fantasy of unlimited capital (Batman, Iron Man), make him a figure of empowerment and agency in a world of consumers who are defined by their lack of these very qualities. (Hassler-Forest, *Superheroes* 138)

Another definition of a superhero is mentioned above, the one that is just a regular human being, albeit the power of 'unlimited capital' makes him special, and gives him the opportunity to act. Unfortunately, the reader is reduced to a mere consumer, which isn't necessarily true, as I will argue in my discussion of the comics reader(ship) and the community later.

What stands out in the history of superheroes is their constant redefinition through time. Their popularity might wax or wane, but the stories keep being told, retold, updated, and whatnot. Gabilliet "crucially" names, "the appearance of Superman, the first superhero" as one of the reasons why comics gained a more

established popularity in the late 1930s, and adds that the figure of the superhero made comics into "an economically viable cultural product, defined by its content" (14, 19). The first *mutation* in the proven superhero formula started happening in the post-war era:

> In the late 1950s, this model of the American superhero as a local do-
> gooder and loyal patriot was radically transformed by a generation of
> comic book creators who reinvented the figure to speak to the interests
> and worldviews of postwar youth. Unlike their fictional forebears, whose
> powers were natural extensions of their body, postwar superheroes
> gained their abilities from radioactive exposure, technological
> enhancement, and genetic manipulation. Where once superheroes
> were symbols of national strength and paragons of U.S. citizenship,
> now they were framed as cultural outsiders and biological freaks
> capable of upsetting the social order in much the same way that racial,
> gendered, and sexual minorities were seen to destabilize the ideal U.S.
> citizen. Rather than to condemn these figures, superhero comics
> visually celebrated bodies whose physical instability deviated from
> social and political norms. (Fawaz 4)

Fawaz's book *New Mutants*, deals with era specific mainstream comics stories throughout the history of the medium and its publishing in the United States. The highly malleable content of comics adapts to the demands of its audience, and in those days (late 50s, early 60s), like Fawaz states, a new kind of audience was emerging. And thus, the figure of the superhero is redefined. Again many years later in the 1980s the figure of the superhero saw its stories take a darker turn and an inward one, which Fawaz identifies as "a highly successful but limited slice of

superhero comic publishing now dominated by stories of vigilante justice" where "euphoric performances of psychic liberation were replaced by terrifying experiences of bodily discorporation, loss of self-control, and the obliteration of one's identity by nonhuman agents of evil" (199, 204). The superhero had become critical of its own existence – metacritical to be more precise. The repercussions of the developments from the 1980s, are still in effect, although since then the superhero has more recently emerged across all platforms as an improved market mainstay; or as Fawaz concludes, "as a figure that embodied notions of bodily freedom and agency, the superhero now dwelled in a medium fully possessed by market forces" (206). Cynically, Hassler-Forest points out that "rather than truly representing philosophies or ideologies that are in any way oppositional, [superheroes] exist in the material sense primarily as commodities in a marketplace where each brand must stand out clearly from the other in order to maintain its commodity value" (38). And that is generally where the superheroes stand today, firmly in the ownership of multimedia conglomerates.

DiPaolo lays down a corresponding, albeit too simple, template for this historical overview: "superhero narratives that remain in constant production for decades tend to follow four stages of narrative development. In the first phase, a passionate creator designs a superhero character for a publisher on a work-for-hire basis;" the three following stages are when the character waters down after the original creators leave, followed by "a radical, deconstructionst take on the character," and ending with the so called fan writers producing "an amalgam of the figure seen in stages one to three" (30-32). The life of the superhero as an intellectual property becomes more complex with time. The more stories were produced the more it reflects on the current state of the character, the larger the pool

of stories from which to draw inspiration. Nevertheless, the publishing history of a character plays but a minor role in the large scale of things, because "the narrative of a character like Superman continues to unfold in the present," and it is only and constantly the *now* that matters and "mainstream superhero comics in general therefore express key aspects of the Jamesonian 'perpetual present'" (Hassler-Forest, *Superheroes* 43, 118). This perpetual present or a constant now the superhero figure exists in continually stands in the way of potential narrative progression:

> Superhero comics have dealt mostly with narratives 'that reveal the inability to achieve utopia, regardless of rationale' (Wolf-Meyer 501). […] the utopian goals implied by the superheroic protagonists are consistently 'dissipated in the construction of narrative' (512). The political aspect of any utopian impulse is thereby lost, with the economic concerns of the audience-based economy 'contaminating utopia and imprisoning the readership in a self-imposed, conservative paradigm dependent upon hegemonic capitalism' (ibid.). (Hassler-Forest, *Superheroes* 119)

Although I feel that superheroes are shouldering the blame for general human failings to exert control over the influence of capital, it is, of course, the articulation of the superhero that has changed over time. Also, the goals of a superhero do not have to be themselves utopian. However, superheroes *do* project ideals. When Fawaz states "the notion that the superhero's purpose was always necessarily to ameliorate social injustice meant that the figure was merely a creative means to an alternate social end," we can identify an important role in the history of mainstream comics, and track the change that happened (235). It is a role that has drifted from

the center of what is in the industry's focus to a peripheral one. "The contemporary obsession with images of the superheroic body subjected to physical torture or death," and stories tend to want to push their central characters to their limits to create excitement and melodrama, and of course to sell more comic books, "is intimately related to public perceptions of citizenship as a bankrupt category of political life and the failure of postwar human rights discourse to prevent mass suffering and global violence" (Fawaz 271).

4. The Industry and Its Practices

It is now visible that it is almost impossible to discuss the figure of the superhero by itself. Every part of the comics industry intersects, and forms a complex whole. And it is the industry, as an all-encompassing term, that shaped the superhero. It created a fresh and branded pantheon, redefinable in its shape and content for any contemporaneity. "Without any gods left to appeal to, the postmodern myths of superheroes offer re-articulations of religious myths, but from the explicit framework of secularized popular culture" (Hassler-Forest, *Superheroes* 21). It is no coincidence then that Grant Morrison's book bears the title *Supergods*, and he also claims: "I had no need for faith. My gods were real, made of paper and light, and they rolled up into my pocket like a superstring dimension" (416). Although written somewhere between a historical overview and a memoir, Morrison's insider's insight (the last three decades are at any rate at least somewhat indebted to his comics writing) is, although not well theoretically versed, absolutely invaluable. Another interesting fact about, not the concept of superhero, but the very word *superhero* is well worth mentioning – the two of the industry's dominant companies and publishers

DC and Marvel "share a trademark on the word 'superhero'" (Wolk 91). That trademark certainly perpetuates an entrenched dominant position in the market for the two.

The niche market that is comics has its numbers regularly crunched on a monthly basis. That is how we know that DC and Marvel are market leaders based on their market share.[1] Marvel is predominantly the leading publisher (usually slightly below the 40 % mark), with DC following suit (usually on either side of the 30 % mark) in both the so called 'dollar share' and 'unit share.' That already amounts to roughly seventy percent of the market in the hands of only two publishers, which are therefore often called the Big Two. The third on that list, Image, is just shy the double digit mark. That leaves barely a quarter of the whole market for the numerous rest.

I have repeated the phrase 'niche market' a couple of times already, and the numbers within a larger picture show why it is logical to call it that:

> While American comic books can be considered a part of a larger popular culture, the medium is far more limited in its direct appeal than other mass media such as film, television and video games. While Hollywood movies, drama series and video games generally depend on audience numbers that are counted by the millions, monthly comic book issues are considered strong sellers if they reach over twenty-five thousand readers, while only the most popular titles reach sales in excess of one hundred thousand (Wright 293). And while it is certainly true that comic books ultimately do have a wider reach than these

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[1] I will not deal here with particular numbers, and my approximations come from two websites (http://www.diamondcomics.com and http://www.comichron.com). Even though sales needless to say fluctuate month-in month-out, the general outlook of the sales and profits of the leading publishers has been quite stable in the last few years.

figures would suggest, due in part to the complicated structure of comic book sales and distribution, comic book readership remains limited enough to be considered a niche market by the producers of mass-market entertainment. (Hassler-Forest, *Transmedia* 97)

When Hassler-Forest mentions a wider reach, we must take into account that what these approximate numbers constitute are just sales (and I would definitely distance myself from the term 'reader' here) of single issues. The readership of any given title could be bigger or even smaller, and the precise numbers can't be calculated in a similar manner. Nevertheless, Wright's claims paraphrased above still hold true. On the one hand, the six digit figures are reserved for only a handful of the most popular titles. On the other, the rest of an average top 100 best-selling titles has only a handful of titles not published by the Big Two. So, what a definition of a 'strong seller' is also might depend on the point of view of the publisher or anyone else. Sales themselves do not influence the contents or an inherent quality of a comic book. However, they do generate certain needs or standards that are expected or have to be met, and the profit-driven market creates a wider set of practices any publisher might follow.

"During the 1990s, classic superheroes were the object of multiple 'rewritings' in a framework that restarted the issue numbering with a new 'first issue' of titles that had been published monthly without interruption since the 1960s (a strategy frequently adopted by Marvel from the middle of the 1990s onward)" (Gabilliet 102). This sort of renumbering might commonly, but not necessarily, be known as a reboot. As Gabilliet notes, and he is not wrong, it is frequently adopted by one of the Big Two. A relaunch which starts with a new number one is definitely going to attract a wider audience. A first issue of any title is a guaranteed strong seller, and the

numbers will fall sharply with the following issues. In an industry which is apparently proud of its continuity, such practices might frustrate readers. However, since it is profit-driven, the practice is justified, and barely any titles the Big Two publish today, with a couple of notable exceptions, exceed the fiftieth issue in numbering, let alone reach a three figured one.

Expanding on the publishing practices of mainstream comics, Gabilliet names another few of them as

> proven formulas over several decades: the addition of a particularly popular artist, the appearance of a popular character, like Wolverine at Marvel or Batman at DC, in the adventures of another protagonist (crossover), or the development of a single story over several parallel series (tie-in) in order to oblige the reader to buy titles other than the ones that they were regularly reading. (154)

The definitions are simple, but not precise enough. What Gabilliet terms as *crossover*, I would define only as a *guest appearance*, which uses corporate synergy (of a more popular character) to try and expand the audience (sales, profit) of another title. A proper *crossover*, on the other hand, is a common story that unfolds over several different titles, unlike a usual story that is contained within its own title. A *tie-in* can mean two different things: a comic book connected and related to another product in a different medium, or a side-story distinctly but not directly connected to the larger, main one. Tie-ins are often most common as side-products to the type of series that has been driving the comics economy in the last two decades – *events*.

Before tackling events and their importance, let me first shed light on the concept of a universe. In American mainstream comics characters often populate

distinct places of a same narrative universe, they share the space of a common

world:

> Corollary to the expansion of comics' visual scale, editors at DC and
>
> Marvel Comics reconceptualized their individual publishing houses as
>
> overseers of distinct fictional 'universes' inhabited by particular cadres
>
> of superhuman characters. They encouraged readers to see each of the
>
> company's superheroes as inhabiting the same unified social world
>
> rather than characters isolated in their own discreet stories. (Fawaz 17)

This greater mobility, rather than isolation, among characters within a shared

universe encourages for more complex storytelling (and with it, of course, publishing)

practices, which in turn, after proof of financial viability, become something of a more

regular feature rather than an exception. The stables of characters that compose

narrative universes – the most notable of which are as might be expected those of

the Big Two: the so called Marvel Universe and DC Universe – are in actuality vast

collections of intellectual property which brings us to "the corporate understanding of

stories as legal or economic entities rather than aesthetic ones" (Hoberek 91).

Producing stories in a universe over years and decades creates continuity, which in

turn informs further stories and developments. Morrison simply, and vividly, puts it

like this:

> Nevertheless, human beings had built working parallel realities. Given
>
> market value as corporate trademarks, the inhabitants of these
>
> functioning microcosms could be self-sustaining and outlast their
>
> creators. New trademarks could be grown in the concept farms of
>
> fictional universes under the auspices of the corporate concerns that

kept them under control, maintaining, trimming, and looking after their burgeoning gardens of newsprint and ink. (118)

However, just one universe is too rigid and not enough. A mainstream comics fictional universe all-encompassingly expands into a multiverse. "The multiverse is a set of mutually incompatible storyworlds. In principle these storyworlds can be viewed as counterfactuals: changing particular elements of the characters' situations, they relate to one other as "what if" versions" (Kukkonen 167). But one universe is still more important. It is *the one* universe:

> Yet the cognitive load imposed by dozens of counterfactuals is immense, and without an established baseline reality it is very difficult to maintain a clear sense of all the different states of affairs that are the case in the multiverse. In order to cope with these challenges of the multiverse, superhero comics need to provide readers with means to identify character versions and the storyworld(s) to which they belong, and *they need to present some basis, in lieu of a single, core reality*, to which readers can relate the counterfactuals of the multiverse. (Kukkonen 162, emphasis mine)

Kukkonen names this as a "postclassical cosmology" (167). In such narrative cosmologies, every possible option turns into an opportunity for expanding storytelling. It should also suffice to note that this is again a space which might be defined as a gutter. As mainstream comics narratives expand their cosmologies into flourishing multiverses they start negotiating fictitious undefined spaces inbetween, which create new opportunities or boundaries. It is here, through fictional universes, years of continuity, and mentioned publishing practices that we get back to events.

An event is a comic book series that is separately and uniquely titled, and which in narrative significance supersedes all other titles of a given fictional universe. It is limited in scope, where limited means a finite number of issues as opposed to an ongoing title which might never end. It unites many characters, and tells a world ending or universe shattering story. Events are devices that facilitate tie-ins and reboots. Tie-ins happen during the course of an event. As the event series provides only a rudimentary story, so to say, other titles tell tie-in stories expanding on the given occurrences of the event premise. Reboots happen afterwards. When the event ends, its ending serves as a platform for launching new or relaunching existing comic book titles directly or indirectly stemming from the event. Along with a usual renumbering, these reboots frequently include permanent or more often just temporary changes to a character's status quo. The successful or less successful narrative reasoning behind it all makes the products more or less palatable. "Just as origin stories supply a comforting sense of narrative beginnings and mythological predestination, the apocalypse promises a revelation that all too often serves to reboot a system that has gone into crisis" (Hassler-Forest, *Superheroes* 209). It is not just that the system has gone into crisis – it has been reverting to it again and again. "The sales enhancement devices (or gimmicks, as their detractors termed them) generated considerable profits for the direct sales system, representing an indefinitely renewable stream of exceptional sales," but the enumerated practices concluding with event series can no longer be called just devices or gimmicks, they have become the focal points of common and continuously successfully applied (mainly as driving economic) practices within the industry (Gabilliet 155).

All this shows that the constant revolving seasonal event-crises and consequentially constant reboots springing out of them, as fatiguing as they grow to be, point toward an important wider pattern:

> The result of this disorientation under neoliberalism is the creation of the 'traumatized consumer': the true subject of disaster capitalism, whose conditioned response to each new crisis or catastrophe is expressed through higher levels of consumption, increased degrees of social alienation, and the thorough commodification of trauma through branding and popular narratives. (Hassler-Forest, *Superheroes* 77)

Comics are, no matter how small their reach might be, therefore representative of a broader cultural-entertainment industry. Hassler-Forest continues to expand on what applies to American mainstream comics because "the [superhero] genre provides metaphorical representations of historical conflicts as part of a battle that takes classical narrative categories as its basic components and *presents catastrophe as an attractive form of spectacle* to be safely consumed by passive spectators" (*Superheroes* 17, emphasis mine). It is also worth emphasizing that these kinds of narrative cycles reflect, with the trends of the wider world at large, the inabilities of the narrative worlds to process movement forward:

> The narrative rapidity of crisis narratives, and their visual imperative to depict acts of world-rending violence, leaves minimal creative space to address complex political categories like citizenship, the nation, race, human rights, and democracy. If the marvelous corpse makes citizenship and its uneven distribution visible by locating the dead superhero's body as the site of an undemocratic injustice that must be

redressed, crisis reduces the complex field of superheroic action to

flexible survivors or unlucky victims. (Fawaz 276)

Event series or crises thus rip open the gutters, deepening them more profoundly in

certain thematic spheres than in others, creating an evident one-sidedness to the

mainstream comics by allowing one facet of it to prevail over others based solely on

economic terms.

Additionally, comics publishing is influenced by corporate synergy tied to other

media, primarily film, but also television. For example, a film incarnation of a

superhero will prompt a publisher to make ready available comic book titles to a

temporarily increased interest, therefore prompting a renumbering reboot, or using

the same antagonists as in the film, though not necessarily in a similar story, or

expanding the list of titles temporarily, reprinting old stories which influenced the film

etc. All of this happens in the period of time between the announcement of the film,

and it opening in cinemas across the world. Within a network of different media

representations of the same brand "each of these incarnations serves as

advertisement for the others. This more flexible type of transmedia practice increases

the franchise's commodity value dramatically because it allows for numerous entry

points" (Hassler-Forest, *Transmedia* 104).

5. Creation, Distribution, and Community

This leads us to the production and the creators of comics, the aspect of

comics which is inevitably more closely linked to the history of comics than the other

aspects that I have already discussed. Creators invariably leave their marks on

comics and characters imparting on them certain trends, styles, or however we

choose to define it. Nevertheless, the time they spend creating comics and writing or drawing stories and characters is just a short period of the overall and still ongoing timeline, be it in the narrative continuity on the pages of comics books or in the history of the medium itself. Such stretches can later be translated and defined into periods of comics history.

A comic book, or an issue, is a stapled pamphlet of thirty-two or thirty-six pages: twenty of which contain the comics' content – the story, while other pages contain ads or additional content like a recap/credits page, letters and editorials. It was a format that was reached after some time as "the comic book stories [were] originally limited to six to eight pages (or ten to thirteen for the star characters) until the moment in the 1960s that the format for comics chopped them into monthly installments of twenty pages" (Gabilliet 308). This is the format of comic books the market has since been following, and any kind of departure from it reflects on the price and potential readership bringing into question the product's future, if it is not some kind of premium content which is almost always in high demand.

"In concrete terms, the majority of pages published in the mainstream comic books have always originated with a collaboration between writer, artist, inker, letterer, and colorist," and this division of labor is pretty standard, although an artist is often called a penciler to separate them from the inker or an artist who does both penciling and inking him or herself, or works in a different medium from pencils and inks, furthermore "each individual contribution required one or more interventions, if need be, from the editor under whose supervision the story was conceived" (Gabilliet 111). "Historically, the first suppliers for publishers were the studios (*shops*, or more pejoratively, *sweatshops*) where pages were produced in mass quantity and literally in an assembly line to fill up the comic books," nowadays the creative team is mostly

freelance, signing exclusive contracts only when certain publishers wish to tie their work-for-hire to themselves and offer a steady stream of work and increased stability for a limited amount of time (Gabilliet 111). Such exclusives pertain almost entirely to writers and artists. Because it is only in the recent few years that colorists, or color artists, with the widespread development of their field of work, started even being credited on the covers of comic books. What seems like common sense, to credit the creators of comics, wasn't really a common practice at all in comics history: "during the 1960s DC, and then Marvel, took the habit of systematically listing at the start of each story the names of the writer and artist" (Gabilliet 67). Gabilliet also claims that "the norm for comic books originated with the fragmentation of the creative process, which considerably delayed the emergence of 'authors' (in the literary sense of the term) and a star system of creators" (111). This leads me to conclude that mainstream comics, within a profit-driven industry, may be called *editor-driven*. The other kind of mainstream comics I will term are *creator-owned*, and *creator-driven* – new comic books (intellectual properties) created and owned by a writer and/(or) artist – and to them I will return after discussing creators.

Editors are important figures in the comics industry, but so are those corporate executives above them. However, editors deal directly with comics and their content in their jobs. How much they drive or have influence on this production depends on the width of their field of work, because not all mainstream comics are corporate properties given into hands of writers and artists to be tended and developed, and not all of those that are function in the same way. The editors manage a line of products, a group of titles, and interact with what the industry often calls 'talent' – the creators – involved with those comic books, and are invaluable in the cooperation of that team. The editors also might be in charge of an editorial or a letter column if

those are present in the comic book. Indirectly they are creators, or rather instigators of creation. "The importance of these editors in the creative process was so important that theirs were the first names to appear on the title pages of their comic books in 1959, while the names of the writers and artist only began to appear progressively over the course of the 1960s," states Gabilliet and makes a film parallel to old Hollywood producers that were in charge before the emergence of the figure of the auteur-director (124).

Creators were forced into a more complex universe of their own after the 1960s during which, as Fawaz states, a "boom allowed some creators unprecedented job security working on successful titles for years at a time" (167). As the history unfolded in the 1970s "with the corporate buyouts of Marvel and DC, creators now had to approach their vocation as a highly complex negotiation between a diversified readership and a newly appointed managerial staff of editors, CEOs, and licensing and marketing experts" (Fawaz 168). The position of the creative work force became even more precarious by the end of that decade, as DC and Marvel adopted

> the 'Work Made for Hire' clause in the Supreme Court's revised copyright law decision in January 1978. Under the revised law, employers own the rights to any work they contract from a creative producer unless explicitly stated otherwise in their contract. Soon after this ruling was issued, both Marvel and DC circulated new contracts stipulating that no artist or writer could work for either company if they did not sign away rights to ownership over materials they produced. (Fawaz 191)

Such practices were common even before the named copyright law act, and long-

standing and complex disputes and lawsuits for the recognition of an artist's

creations, rights, and financial reparation can still rage.[2] "When Jack Kirby quit

Marvel in 1970, he had no claim on any of the intellectual property that he had

created, which included up to 80 percent of Marvel superheroes in the 1960s," and

that is an interesting fact (Gabilliet 117). While today the publishing giants have

protected themselves from repetition of such scenarios, and the creators know that

their creations are no longer their own except perhaps in name, it is still important to

recognize the history of comics creators. This newfound uncertainty and flexibility

completely overturned the industry and the market:

> With the institution of the Work Made for Hire clause in the late 1970s,
>
> the value of distinct kinds of creative laborers – including writers,
>
> pencillers, inkers, colorists, and letterers – became a question of
>
> serious concern. Previously all creators on a comic book were
>
> understood as part of a seamless team working simultaneously on a
>
> single product regardless of their specific task. Under Work Made for
>
> Hire these laborers were contracted independently of one another,
>
> giving companies greater leeway to hire and fire individual laborers on a
>
> project at their discretion. (Fawaz 196)

Such state of affairs has finally left all the power in the hands of corporations, and

changes that ensued to the creative part of the mainstream comics reverberate even

today. In the 1980s perhaps the best known comics, and stories whose impact has

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[2] To expand on this a bit it is perhaps necessary to name a couple of cases to point in the right direction: the legal dispute about the ownership of Superman; Neil Gaiman's legal fight for the ownership of a co-created character; Tony Moore's suit over the proceeds of *The Walking Dead* property; the entire history of the character and comic book *Marvelman/Miracleman* etc.

been seminal for decades to come, Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* were, according to Fawaz, a response to the changes that happened:

> These miniseries unabashedly deconstructed the assumed moral character of the American superhero by telling stories of superhuman vigilantes at odds with the very nation they had once dutifully served; unsurprisingly they did so by reasserting superheroic masculinity, and its perversion into a fascistic drive to dominate or control the unthinking masses, as an indicator of the nation's political decline. (232)

This prevailing picture of the dark superhero in the 1980s that, I may argue, has almost become a blinkered canonical attitude, is all but ignored in Fawaz's analysis. He opts instead to provide a different approach and expand the larger picture. He uses the storytelling trope of demonic possession to illustrate his point. Unlike in the 1970s, in the 1980s "rather than merely a backlash narrative against the political thrust of radical sexual and gender politics these narratives lamented the co-optation of feminist and gay liberation social values by consumer capitalism," Fawaz claims (205). Comics thus reflect the times they are created in on every level of creation – through their characters and stories, through their creators, through the corporations that own the intellectual property.

These changes in the market were also the reason why since the 1990s there has been a considerate growth among creator-owned comics. "An ambiguity persists with regard to the concept of *creator-driven* production. The term 'independent publishers' (*indies*) designates publishers who allow their creators ownership of their creations, in contrast to the policies of Marvel and DC," states Gabilliet (105). Again, I

would like to clarify and expand on the terminology Gabilliet uses here. Creator-driven and -owned production can be converse to the corporate production; however, it is still just a part of American mainstream comics following the formal structure that's already available. The term 'independent publishers' also depends on the point of view – they are probably devoid of the complex conglomerate subsidiary structure and operate with a completely different set of demands, but they are still a part of the same market. The 'ambiguity' might have been meanwhile eliminated, in the (considerable) period since his work was first published (2005). These smaller publishers operate differently, they often act as licensees of popular properties whose origin is not comics, and then some of them balance it out with independent original, that is to say creator-driven comics. These publishers offer a platform. Be it one for often already successful and branded creators' own work or completely new authors and comics. One such platform is Image Comics, which was formed by a group of star creators:

> The emergence of a third force that could challenge the Big Two, who had dominated the entire industry since the end of the 1960s, seemed highly improbable. But, in contrast to these earlier cases, Image launched a series of titles backed by the superstar popularity that their creators achieved at Marvel. To the surprise of the Big Two, the first Image comics were instant commercial successes, with sales surpassing a million copies per issue (including reprints), and Image took away 15 percent of Marvel's market share. In the spring of 1993, Image adopted the cooperative operations that remain unchanged today: the studios or the artists that they publish retain ownership of

their creations and are free to publish elsewhere when they want to.

(Gabilliet 149)

The narrative of creators making a name and a following for themselves and their work at one or both of the Big Two first, and then, after their exclusive or not contract runs out, trying to capitalize on that position by launching a series of creator-owned original titles is a recurring one. One of the goals is also to guide your creator-owned property into making the jump to other media, as a TV series or film, because some "comics actually do aspire to being movies, mostly for economic reasons: license your story or characters to Hollywood and there's a lot of money to be made" (Wolk 14). This cycle is representative of a star system for comics' creators. Some branch out from art to writing, some writers branch out into other media like TV or film. Artists (pencilers and inkers) are somewhat limited in the scope of work they can produce at regular intervals, monthly of course, and rarely (can) produce more than an issue's worth of work. On the other hand, the writer and all the other members of the creative team regularly work on a larger number of titles. A writers monthly work can encompass juggling as few as just one title to as much as, I will use this number from my reading experience, seven (though not for an extended period of time).

In the comics world everything revolves around Wednesdays. On that day every week published comics hit the stands, so to say, because newsstands are a figurative term and they haven't been holding comics for many years. Comics in their public and readership, revolve around a community. And the community coalesces around specialized stores, comic book shops. "By the 1970s the progressive aging of [comics] readers allowed the emergence of a subculture articulated around a dense network of specialty stores and a community of collectors henceforth targeted by the mainstream segment of the industry" (Gabilliet xix). The shops, no matter how

specialized or niche they might seem from an outside perspective, offer an increased and focused visibility for the medium. And the specialized shops proliferation "owed its growth to the direct sales distribution system" and "only the publishers who correctly negotiated this turning point reaped the benefits of the industry's recovery during the 80s" (Gabilliet 86). Once again the market was tipped in the Big Two's favor, because "in 1973, Phil Seuling proposed this new system to the large publishers, which would allow them to avoid the primary pitfall of the traditional circuit – the return of unsold units" (Gabilliet 143). This is what 'direct sales' means. The issues sold do not return to their publishers. Gabilliet proceeds to describe the direct market: the dominant force there today is Diamond Comics Distributors, which sends a monthly bulky magazine called *Previews* from which the retailers make their orders "and send them in, along with payment, to the publishers without any real assurance that the items ordered would be available on the announced date" (146). Before, it was more common for titles to be late, all orders would be cancelled and then resolicited at a later date, or just vanish. However, due to the technological advancement and accelerated communication it is a much rarer case today. Also, comics are created well in advance and solicited in the *Previews* magazine three months in advance. The creators can expand their fan base, reach it and be reached online, making the communication direct and flexible. Such direct communication is also possible at conventions or cons, a sort of entertainment fairs which formerly focused on comics but nowadays encompass a whole wide variety of commodities and practices. "Conventions concentrate the diverse types of investment in comic books in the largest sense – the possibility of acquiring comic books, figurines, gadgets, autographs, and the like is added to the function of a forum of exchanges

(verbal and monetary) and communication between individuals in a cultural system"
(Gabilliet 266).

The expansion and renegotiation of the community changed with the market.
"The 1990s saw the gradual entry of comics work into the general book market,
primarily issuing from the comic book industry under the generic term 'graphic
novels'" (Gabilliet 98). The graphic novel term here means either one of the two
things: the more usual one is a *trade paperback* or just *trade*, a collection of
previously published issues, usually containing a whole story arc; or an *original
graphic novel* or *OGN*, with completely new content created for the occasion. The
availability of comics, though not in their pamphlet form, in general bookstores,
Gabilliet notes, was a success due to the larger number of said stores in comparison
to specialized book stores (210). This also brought "a glimpse of a newly emerging
diversified readership capable of generating a demand for comics that is open to an
infinite horizon eclipsing the narrow superhero formulas that have characterized the
last decades of the twentieth century" (Gabilliet 211). These developments show
public demands as a positive agent and effect for changes. A diversified readership
begs for more diversity in representation.

There is an additional aspect of community within comics – letter columns.
Fawaz writes that they "stand out as an important source of cultural knowledge
because of their extraordinary range of demographic representation, aesthetic and
political points of view, and forms of fan response to both the content of superhero
comics and the opinions of other fans" (97). He is nevertheless wary of the larger
picture:

Unlike the visual content of comics, which is explicitly fictional, fan

letters are presented as putatively real responses *to* fictional texts. Yet

they also produce their own social worlds, modes of address, and

internal regulations. Letters also have the potential to be falsified or

doctored by editors. Finally, as I have already suggested, the

winnowing down of presumably hundreds (even thousands) of letters to

a select few to be published in each month's column was necessarily

informed by editorial determinations and market interests. (Fawaz 101)

This proves the importance of the editor's position within the comics system and his

or her potential influence on the wider picture once again. I would also claim that

today this type of community has migrated online, although letters pages can still play

an important role among smaller, independent, and creator-owned comics –

providing, along with general communication between a creator and a fan, a safe

space for expanding discussions and defining it as a locus of resistance.

It is also important to note comics' problematic areas, those of gender and

race which appear across three different levels – those of the creators, the readers,

and the representation in the form of characters. There was a "racial homogeneity in

comic book labor (which was almost uniformly white)," although today, with the

flexibility of the workforce, freelance artists hail and work from all over the world

(Fawaz 197). However, historically that uniformity of comic book labor had created,

through decades of work, a uniformly white representation as well. The figure of the

superhero was predominantly white and male. Again, only today, with widespread

creative and corporate efforts has the wider picture begun properly changing:

Certainly these representations are not all equivalent, nor do they

collectively prove a single, unified philosophy of neoliberal

multiculturalism shared by creators and corporate management.

Yet they do illuminate a trend toward a diversification *without*

creative world-making practices that has undoubtedly dulled, if

not wholly undermined, the radical political edge of comic books

in the contemporary moment. (Fawaz 278)

I embrace such developments, but as cynical as I can be, and as Fawaz shows, I

must warn that those changes can be interpreted, and proven right from some future

point in time, as financially motivated by revenue streams – more a reaction to the

times, than some foundations for deep and thorough changes at the core – as

comics are a complex negotiation between their creators, their audience, and their

corporate overlords, and reflect the times in which they were made – and today they

"promise audiences the pleasure of seeing their own diverse identities […]

represented in their favorite superhero comics, but no sense that the heterogeneity of

those identities could and *should* change the world" (Fawaz 279).

Historically comics have also become indentified as a boys' pastime. This was

also probably thanks to the uniformly male creative teams. Diversity, not only in

representation on page, but in the creative names as well, is helping to balance out

the skewed picture. However, unlike when it comes to profits and units sold, precise

numbers are not readily available when it comes to readers' demographics.

Nevertheless, it is safe to say interest in comics spans the gender spectrum and it is

pretty evenly balanced out. This does not mean that the problematic history of the

representation of female characters and the objectification of female bodies is

completely gone, but with higher standards in production it is definitely reduced or

flagged through community voices online. Comics have put forward a number of popular tests or definitions for common plot devices regarding the representation of female characters. The most famous one is the Bechdel Test, created in comic form about movies and whether in any given film there are two named female characters who talk to each other about anything else than a man. The two more recent ones were popularized by two comics writers. Gail Simone named the trope of killing a female character close to the protagonist in order to motivate him *Women in Refrigerators* after a development in a Green Lantern comic where the protagonist comes home and finds his girlfriend dead in the fridge. Used as a plot device not only in comics, it is also popularly known as *fridging*. Kelly Sue DeConnick came up with the *Sexy Lamp Test*, where it is tested whether a female character can be substituted with a 'sexy lamp' without any change in the story; if the answer is yes then the story should obviously be reconsidered. It is here that the community elements come into play the best – between the creators and the readers. Any developments, as well as negative ones, are always used, and for the negative ones we can hope it is only retroactively, as PR opportunities.

I have so far refrained from mentioning the word *fan*. Fans are definitely a complicated ground, and, in my view, a somewhat derogatory term. A fan is a consumer, someone who participates passively in the spectacle of comics and does so implicitly without critical thinking. However, fans are also a vocal force. "Innovation was not seen as a good thing from the point of view of the large publishers. A strip that was too 'original' was, in effect, always at risk being rejected by a readership that was looking for standardized products, continually searching for the same stimuli and the same stories" (Gabilliet 130). It is the standardized products that are the staple of the comics industry, and with the influence of profit and capital, and years of narrative

continuity veiled as tradition, changes are not wholeheartedly welcome. As Morrison recounted: "a gullible media, happy to believe that DC Comics might actually kill off a lucrative trademark, created an intense buzz around the story of Superman's death, which resulted in record-breaking sales" (325). Such practices rarely ever work twice with the same intensity. And as I have mentioned such narrative crises supersede any other 'smaller stories,' removing along cultural capital from them.

6. Conclusion

American serial graphic narrative, or comics, is a complex network of correlations today on any given level. By providing a reference framework I have tried to define the comics industry through its production, products, and practices. Nevertheless, it is still just the tip of the iceberg.

Firstly, by defining and discussing the term of the gutter, I have shown that it, which by definition often revolves just around the space between two panels on a page, actually spreads in all directions. This desire for closure which is being articulated at the site of the gutter(s) becomes a place beyond only narrative definition of comics, gaining a dimension of economic definition as well as economic exploitation. I continued on to define the figure of the superhero as the most recognizable symbol of American comics. As they are not defined by what or who they are but by what they represent, superheroes are often regarded as a genre or as synonyms for American comics. They exist as the most successful platform for commercially viable comics, they are brands with the highest commodity value. Superhero comics have reflected and changed through times, their ideologies running on empty. However, they have inevitably stayed chained to human history,

and as such their stories are cyclic, they "foreclose the possibility of discursive closure, and, therefore, signification" and they also "seem to stage the same fundamental dynamic over and over again, offering no alternatives, but also quite convinced that this kind of center simply will not hold" (Hassler-Forest, *Cowboys and Zombies* 354). Comics, with their usual monthly publishing schedules, and their never-ending stories, unfold in a perpetual now and do not allow narrative progress or closure.

In my final two parts I discussed the practices of the comics industry, the creation of comics themselves, and the communities that surround them. The term practice extends across publishing practices created to drive the profits up, as well as across narrative practices which led the largest publishers to create complex ever-expanding narrative universes of their comics and with whole stables of characters populating them. The entrenching corporatization of the publishing companies was ostensibly opposed by the creative laborers whose resistance is written into the stories and thereby into comics history. It is at that aspect the most where I could not avoid discussing historical comics developments, even though I have in general removed any deeper historical insight for the lack of space. Comics stories can therefore also function at a meta-level of narrative as they also speak of themselves indirectly. Based on the twenty page published format comics depend on a regular community which gathers around a network of specialized comic book shops.

Contemporary comics narratives revolve around world threatening crises, as well as the industry's trying to redress its history of uniform whiteness and maleness.

The narrative profusion of 'crisis' events in postmillennial superhero comics symbolizes the full absorption of the comic book industry into

the workings of neoliberal capital. […] These narratives are relentlessly

exploited for their ability to sell comics because of their visual spectacle

and violent unmaking of fictional worlds. They embody in fantasy form

the actual temporal rhythms of the neoliberal security state, which

unfolds historically as a series of seemingly never-ending political

crises, economic shocks, acts of local and state violence, and mass

death in the name of corporate profit and upward mobility for the

privileged few at the expense of the world. (Fawaz 272)

Imagining or reflecting these disaster capitalism crises in serial narrative form leads

to an erosion of narrative through constant repetitive loops, an echo chamber of

questions without a satisfying answer, a gutter where closure cannot be achieved

and is not encouraged to. These practices reflect the larger picture of the two biggest

publishers, while pocket sites of resistance can be found within the comics

community being developed by certain creator-owned comics titles and their

audiences, calling on the past times when comics involved themselves in, what

Fawaz termed as, 'world-making' projects. Such oases are really rare in the comics

market landscape, and are a niche within a niche, but with the support of an online

community of readers, blogs or web-sites they can garner cultural capital for a more

widespread acclaim. Unlike this idealized picture of creator-owned comics, "the comic

book industry's contemporary identity politics […] involves obscuring corporate profits

through the spectacular representational diversity" because "both companies have

found their previous investment in left-wing political imaginaries dovetailing with

contemporary rights-based discourses and the politics of representation," and then

they "unabashedly capitalized on this fortuitous alliance […] framing each one of their

decisions to expand the range of superhero representation as an expression of their

progressive values and their supposedly benevolent attention to the needs of a diverse readership" (Fawaz 277).

In conclusion, my initial expansive approach to this topic feels vindicated, as reducing American comics to any single one aspect or comic book could be observed as inadequate. And, as fictional universes have grown in complexity and further on blossomed into multiverses, we also have to

> conceive of comics as historically constituted objects emerging from distinct social and material conditions – including shifting economic demands, the biographies of different creators, demographic transformations in readership, and new printing technologies – while also seeing their rich narrative and visual content as producing imaginative logics that offer ways of reconceiving, assessing, and responding to the world that are *not* reducible to any single historical factor. (Fawaz 23)

Reading mainstream comics becomes a site for defining a set of constant negotiations and renegotiations. Morrison wrote that "superhero stories are sweated out at the imagined lowest levels of our culture" (416), and American mainstream comics, with their apparently low value on the cultural ladder, and relatively short history as a medium, have repeatedly grown in their cultural stature and legitimacy, and still continue to redefine their position within the cultural and entertainment industries.

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8. Abstract

The topic of this paper is the medium of comics and its place in American culture, with the main focus being mainstream comics. The cultural influence of comics has grown significantly in the last couple of decades increasing the popularity of comics, characters from comics, and their contents and brands with the expansion into other media. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the workings of the American comics as an industry and this industry's practices through a series of interconnected topics. American mainstream comics are published in issues, small pamphlets with twenty pages of story, and their serial nature is inherent. Beginning at the theoretical definition of the medium and its language, about what defines and constitutes comics, significance is placed on the term of the gutter. The gutter is a space between panels, and it's a place of articulation, of the creation of meaning and implied narration. In my argument I expand this space of articulation into the gutters or gaps between comic book issues and titles, also naming the gutter as a place of economic articulation. This economy and the close connection to capital are visible in all aspects of mainstream comics. The second part discusses the figure of the superhero, the most recognizable symbol and the most dominant product of American mainstream comics. I show how the superhero functions a malleable platform for narratives, and how those narratives change over time and depend on outside influences, their primal allure lying in their abilities to circumnavigate the limitations of everyday life. The last two parts deal with the comics industry, its publishing practices, and the creation and distribution of comics, as well as the community of readers and consumers. The seasonal and cyclical comics stories, which function both as publishing and narrative devices, serve to increase profit margins and have entrenched certain practices over the years, positioning the

industry and American mainstream comics firmly inside the grasp of neoliberal

capitalism.

9. Keywords

Comics, gutter, superheroes, comics industry, capitalism