Superheroes and Anti-Heroes in Comics and Graphic novel

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In his essay *The Myth of Superman*, Umberto Eco claims that in superhero comics nothing really changes: this is one of the most characteristic aspects of the superhero who is a status quo defender. By the end of each story, everything is back to normal. It's 1964 when Eco wrote it, 20 years before one of the biggest revolutions in the superhero comic books history, the beginning of the *Dark Age*.

Graphic novels like *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, *The Dark Knight Returns* revolutionize the concept of "superhero". But we are not talking about superheroes anymore, we are in front of antiheroes. Something else is different too: in these stories, something really happens, there is not a return to the status quo, but a transformation, sometime a revolution.

The difference between superhero and antihero means also a difference between the kind of story, between comic and graphic novel. I argue that the antihero narrative is linked to the graphic novel format, while superheroes go on with their infinite battle to defend the status quo on the pages of comic books.

1) Umberto Eco's *The Myth of Superman*

Each tale of the superhero "does not solve anything" writes Umberto Eco in his analysis "The myth of Superman": In his world, the hero acts, accomplishes something. He consumes himself he makes a step forward to his end; and yet, in comic, there is never an end. The seriality creates a narrative paradox: the superhero must act without consuming himself. At the end of each one of his adventures, the world must return the same, so that next month with the new issue, everything can start again. That means eternal youth, vague and confuse memory about his past adventures, and how Stan Lee called it, the illusion of change. After thousands of battles against villains and monsters, everything is exactly like before: that means a stasis in which superheroes do not accomplish something. Their world cannot change.[1]

This time structure, typical of comics, suits particularly well for the superhero genre. One of the aspects that characterise the superhero is, in fact, the defence of the status quo: the superhero does not want to change society, instead intends to defend it from external threats that come to disturb the order. The return of the already known, reaffirming the values in force, ensures a reassuring and pleasant reading, just as it is reassuring the hero who at the end of his adventure managed to solve everything and "bring everything back to normal".

Eco wrote this analysis in 1964, that means in the middle of the Silver Age. It is still valid when we speak about serial comics. However, he did not take into consideration the significant transformation that the genre knew after that period, and he did not consider a new evolution of the comic strip, which is the graphic novel.

Eco speaks about what he called "imaginary tales", stories included inside the serial narrative, but "imaginary", that never actually happen to the character. They are a hypothesis, what if, dreams or phantasies. They anticipate the graphic novel's structure – something happens. However, it is not "real": the hero wakes up, and everything goes back, one more time, to normal, once again reaffirmed comics' time structure.
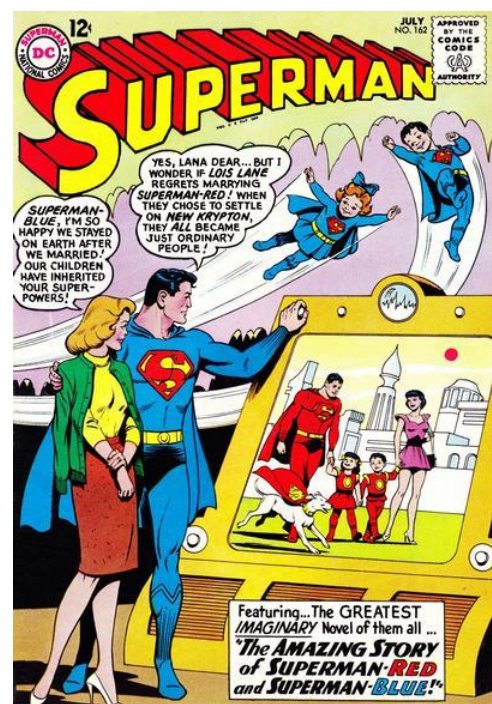
Graphic novels are slightly different: they are not dreams or hypothesis included in the serial narrative; instead, they are "closed" fictional universes. Often they tell the stories of new characters (Watchmen, V for Vendetta), but also when the graphic novel is about characters like Batman, Superman, Spider-Man, who already are in comic series, usually it is not an imaginary tale, a dream inside the continuity, rather an alternative reality, a possible future. Inside these parallel universes, something happens: there is not a return to the starting status quo, but a transformation – and not necessarily a positive one.

The term "graphic novel" starts to be used when Eco publishes his text about Superman. Some comics begin to be called "graphic novel" in the attempt to give them more dignity and seriousness. They are not "funny comics" for kids, but novels for adults.

This characterisation of the two genres – often also used today if one wants to talk about comics "in a serious way" – is not correct. It attributes value to the medium in general and does not consider the particular stories. Its difference with comics today is not in order of value. Beyond all the differences dictated by marketing graphic novels are distinguished from comics mainly because of their structure. The graphic novel tells a concluded story, in which something happens indeed: at the end, the situation is not the same as at the beginning — the opposite of the comics' serial publication that offers only the illusion of change.

2) The *Dark Age*

It is after the Silver Age that the graphic novels begin to succeed also in the superhero narrative. Two will become a milestone for the genre: *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* are the most representative of this new age, called by Grant Morrison *Dark Age*.[2]

A deconstruction of the superhero figure characterises this period. Superhero's relationship with society becomes problematic. He does not fight for the supreme Good, because there is not such a thing. The once Best of all possible worlds that the superhero could fight for without any questions is now in crisis, corrupt, ambiguous.

The criticism of society, of the outdated values of the previous generation, of the America of Vietnam, of Watergate, of the cold war, is no longer latent or barely mentioned, but

distinct, irreverent, ferocious. The infamous Comic Code loses importance. All those elements repressed for many years explode, the world of superheroes is filled with violence, sex, social problems, death. The line between good and evil, already uncertain in the Silver Age, completely disappears. The world and the United States lose their certainties, "right" and "wrong" become ambiguous concepts and at times senseless, good and evil are lost in a grey area. The Villains almost disappear: Watchmen is the perfect example, a world with superheroes in which the villains have long disappeared.

A new generation of brutal heroes arises, who kill, torture, slaughter to inflict their punishment and impose their justice. It is the time of bloodthirsty antiheroes like The Punisher, Wolverine, V, Elektra, Rorschach. These characters do not want to re-establish the status quo; they challenge it, sometimes even destroy it.

Is it still possible to speak about superheroes? The concept itself is questioned. While new antiheroes arise, the old superheroes become extremely problematic characters. The "pure" superhero, the Golden Age status quo's defender, described by Eco, becomes a ridiculous caricature.

Superheroes cannot change society because, in order to do so, they should define a concrete good outside the status quo that should be followed and the evil inside the society that should be destroyed. They would become problematic and controversial: they would inevitably clash with ambiguity and different points of view – they would become more antiheroic.

When confronted with real problems, the superhero becomes more controversial and antiheroic – think of Mark Millar's Ultimates that are used to fight "Rogue state" and to impose American values on the whole world[3] – or it is merely ineffective, as in Alex Ross and Paul Dini Superman, who tries to fight world hunger and fails.[4] The only thing a superhero can do is defend or restore a generally "good" previous situation, without too many questions on what "good" is, and, in doing so, superheroes make the comic's seriality possible.

3)   Antiheroes: a dystopic world.

The relationship with society is essential to define superheroes and antiheroes. Superhero's function to protect and restore the essentially "good" society makes him suited to media comic that carries on a virtually infinite narrative line. While the comic's structure

fits well the superhero, graphic novels often favour antiheroes: these characters do not reaffirm the status quo's values; instead, they challenge them. They bring a fracture with a negative reality. A revolutionary antihero like V, for example, attacks his status quo. His world is not good, but problematic, even dystopic. Also, in Watchmen we have a dystopic America, that should not be protected, but completely revolutionize.

Even if the antihero is the protagonist of a serial comic – take, for example, Frank Castle, aka the Punisher – there is not a return to a good status quo. Frank is inserted in the same dynamic described by Eco – but we are not facing a superhero, but a rebel antihero. The narrative is circular and virtually endless but with two significant differences. The first: while the superhero is primarily reactive, faces a threat to society, the antihero is often proactive, he attacks first. Frank does not wait for an external threat, but attacks evils already present within society.

Moreover, here we see the other fundamental difference: while the status quo defended and restored by the superhero is overall good, the antihero of the comic finds himself always in a negative, tragic, corrupt reality. The Punisher operates in the same world of Spider-Man, but his personal reality is extremely dystopic, made of blood and tragedy. An initial situation is not re-established after a threat; instead, the rebel antihero is trapped inside an essentially negative reality without the possibility of escape. A revolutionary antihero like V succeeds in actual change his world, while the actions of the rebel antihero are ultimately useless.

Inside a society that should be destroyed and not protected, the protagonist cannot be a hero. A character like V is emblematic: V cannot reaffirm the values of his dystopic, fascist London. He needs to destroy it – but in order to do so, he needs to be a "villain". Inside the dystopic world created by Alan Moore, the only possible superhero is a Villain who attacks his world status quo. V, to destroy his dystopic society, should also resort to action against our moral. He succeeds to defeat the fascist Norsefire government, but only with violence, terrorism, murder. Even if the London of Alan Moore appears entirely against our values, so

are V's actions to destroy it.[5]

When this attack is not merely a rebellion but became a revolution, then a return to the original status quo is not possible. Instead, there is a transformation. V, Watchmen and TDKR are the most representative examples. These stories cannot be told through a serial comic book; they must be a graphic novel.

Although initially published in episodes, we are not reading serial comics. The story that is narrated is not meant to follow that endless cycle described by Eco, but to end conclusively with the last number. Antiheroes like V or Ozymandias change their fictional worlds, they succeed to destroy the current status quo.

V's revolution was already mentioned. Something happens in the graphic novel Watchmen too: Rorschach dies, Dr Manhattan leaves Earth forever, New York is devastated, the nuclear war menace is (maybe) avoided. Watchmen follows a circular structure, beginning and end are connected. However, it is a closed narrative universe, and it is not designed to follow the endless cycle of the comics.

Even a classic superhero like Batman, inside a graphic novel, becomes an antihero who does not protect the status quo but challenges it. While Miller's story goes on, Batman becomes more and more antiheroic while America becomes more and more dystopic. Something happens: The Joker dies, the world changes, Batman gives up ultimately his Bruce Wayne persona. In the end, we see the old Bruce Wayne planning his future revolution – a revolution that happens on the sequel, The dark knight strikes back.

To change the status quo, the vague concept of "good" of the superheroes, it is not enough. The antihero finds himself in a grey area where good and evil are not easily recognisable. The antihero can change the world – but he must pay a terrible price and made terrible choices. Ozymandias manages to avoid nuclear catastrophe at the price of millions of lives. V can target the dictator only by resorting to lethal force and terroristic action.

The superhero is possible only thanks to the support of society; but when it is society itself that should be questioned and changed, the only way to be effective is antiheroic.

3) Conclusion

Two last considerations. Many of these works quoted today had a sequel. After TDKR we have DK2 and recently TDK3 the Master Race. Watchmen's characters are inserted in

the DC narrative universe with the series Doomsday Clock. That means we are again in front of the typical comic book endless seriality.

However, these sequels do not affect the original work. TDKR first sequel still follows the structure of the graphic novel: a dystopic world, a revolution, destruction of the previous order. The third and last one presents a comic book structure: an external threat and the defence of society. However, we have, in both cases, a story written long after the first one that is forcibly added to an already finished narrative. The original graphic novel – written to be a concluded work – remains a closed fictional universe.

The same happens with Watchmen. Alan Moore's characters are inserted inside DC Universe and in the endless comic book narrative with the project doomsday clock. However, the original Alan Moore's graphic novel remains independent to this later reinterpretation.

Every imaginary character, not only in the superhero genre, can be later reused in a new narrative – but that does not mean that his original story changes. A character like Sherlock Holmes had dozens of reinterpretation and new stories, or we can think about the League of extraordinary gentlemen, where Alan Moore reinterprets characters of the English Victorian literature. The original works are not affected. The same happens with the quoted graphic novels: they are thought to be conclusive, they remain graphic novel even if they are later reinterpreted and inserted in a serial comic book narrative. Of course, it is possible to write a new story, to make a sequel to a graphic novel. However, the initial idea behind it is to tell a concluded story, while the comic is already written to be a never-ending story.

Today stories and characters became more and more complex. It is difficult to find a "pure" superhero: with the growing complexity of the character a superficial division between Good and Evil is not possible. The line between superhero and antihero is oft blurred. This character complexity reflects itself in the story structure:

The comic book's narrative follows longer cycles than before. The return to the original status quo becomes longer and more complex; something that challenges the "illusion of change" sometimes seems possible: new characters, life changes, growth.

Of course, the seriality will always create the narrative paradox described by Eco. However, every main complex narrative line in its totality are incredibly like a graphic novel. Millar's Ultimates or Civil War, Bendis and Brubaker Daredevil's Run, The Authority are a good example. During these stories, something happens– and the classic superheroes become more and more antiheroic. It takes a long time before everything goes back to

normal, and the superheroes are reconfirmed as such. The difference between hero and antihero falls almost apart and, together with it, the difference between comics and the graphic novel becomes indistinct.

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[1] Cfr. Eco Umberto, *Apocalittici e integrati. Comunicazioni di massa e teorie della cultura di massa*. Bompiani, Milano 2016.

[2] Cfr. Morrison Grant, *Supergods. What masked vigilantes, miraculous mutants, and a sun god from Smallville can teach us about being human*. Spiegel & Grau, New York 2012.

[3] Cfr. Millar Mark (Writer), Hitch Bryan (Artist), *Ultimates 2. Dei e mostri.* Trad. Italiana di Ronchetti P. Marvel Comics/Panini Comics, Modena, 2005/2010, and Millar Mark (Writer), Hitch Bryan (Artist), *Ultimates 2. Il*

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[4] Cfr. Dini Paul (Writer), Ross Alex (Artist), *Absolute Justice League: the world's greatest super-heroes*. DC Comics, Burbank 2017.

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