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Chapter 8

Nostalgia, Myth, and Ideology: Visions of Superman at the End of the "American Century"

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> Then came, out of nowhere, nostalgia—including nostalgia for things the nostalgia lovers were too young to know.
>
> —Friedrich, 1988, p. 72

It is perhaps self-evident that a comic book character that has been in existence for some 60 years owes some of its popularity to nostalgia. Certainly Otto Friedrich in his 1988 *Time* magazine celebration of Superman's 50 years could find no better reason to explain the resurgence of the character's popularity in the late 1970s. But nostalgia never comes out of nowhere.

In the common usage of "nostalgia," many Americans, and indeed others, probably have some wistful memories of Superman, whether from the character's portrayal as a comic book, radio show, comic strip, movie serial, television show, or movie superhero. Some might well have a sentimental yearning for the period in which they first encountered Superman, but few, I venture, would think of themselves as suffering from the disease of homesickness in their thoughts about the character. Labeling the nostalgia for Superman as ideological might suggest a too-easy criticism along the lines of the old joke that Superman, standing for truth and justice on the one hand and the American way on the other, was surely an oxymoron. Nonetheless the nostalgia associated with Superman operates at a number of levels that can be usefully explored to understand the operation of nostalgia as ideology.

There are two facets to the argument that follows. First, I want to argue that Superman connects a wistful nostalgia—nostalgia as

homesickness if you will—to a commodity, and in this fashion subjects both longings for the past, and the past itself, to the ideology of the market in which everything can be commodified and sold. Second, since World War II Superman's owners have explicitly tied the character to "the American Way," which is an ideological construct that among other things unites two seemingly disparate values—individualism and consumerism—with democracy and labels it American. Nostalgia about the character then is inevitably linked to this notion of America, which gives it a particular ideological cast, possibly more so when the subject of longings is not an American.

Nostalgia and Ideology

The manner in which I use nostalgia and ideology owes much to Clifford Geertz. The heart of the problem is in understanding how "ideologies transform sentiment into significance" (Geertz, 1973, p. 207). Geertz tries to understand this process by examining the stories people tell to and about themselves. Before turning to such tales, some working definition of nostalgia is necessary. During James Cook's extended voyage in the South Pacific from 1768 to 1771, the men on board his ship developed an acute longing for home, which the ship's surgeon named as a new disease: nostalgia. The term has been much expanded on since, but still retains the notion of a longing for return, a return to a past, to a past that we can never go back to, just as we can never truly return home once having left. In reviewing the widespread critique of nostalgia in the 1960s and 1970s, Christopher Lasch (1984) argued that what is often erased from such evaluations is that while we may not be able to return home, we also carry that home with us in ways that are inescapable. It shapes our present. But, he argued, both nostalgia and anti-nostalgia denied a dependence on the past in daily life, the first by romanticizing the past and the second by demanding life be lived in the here and now. It is also well to remember that Cook's sailors were on a long and difficult voyage in waters dangerous to Europeans, and that a longing for home, far from being pathological, may well have been eminently sensible.

Some theorists have sought to expand the concept of nostalgia beyond the limitations and oppositions Lasch identified. The anthropologist Renato Rosaldo has observed that even as "we valorize innovation" we "yearn for more stable worlds, whether these reside in our own past, in other cultures, or in the conflation of the two" (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 108). Stuart Tannock made the distinction that nostalgia looks to "the past as a stable source of value and meaning" but not necessarily "with the desire for a stable, traditional, and hierarchized society" (1995, p. 455). Concepts of nostalgia have also been used to explain the shaping and performing of postmodern identities in a play of difference and repetition (Frow, 1997, p. 68). This notion has been stretched in a manner whereby nostalgia is linked to the performance of identity as a set of memory structures or grammar through which individuals "invent rhetorical performances of themselves" (Dickinson, 1997, p. 2). Susan Stewart argues nostalgia relies on the process of creating a narrative of the past, which in affect denies the present, and gives the past the whiff of authenticity. This sense of authentic comes from the narrative rather than any *a priori* veracity (Stewart, 1984, p. 23). In effect nostalgia is a construction that also denies the past except as narrative mediation. By examining a narrative then it should be possible to locate the transformation of nostalgic sentiment into significance.

The popularity in Australia in 1994 of the television series *Lois & Clark (The New Adventures of Superman)* sparked my initial interest in nostalgia as ideology. In 1994, *Lois & Clark* was a surprise hit in Australia, particularly given that its popularity in the United States was fairly marginal (it ranked third behind CBS and NBC during its September 12, 1993 network Sunday-night debut on ABC, for instance). In Australia it consistently ranked in the top 10 shows, beating the Ten Network's Commonwealth Games (a sports feast ranking second only to the Olympics) coverage in the ratings, and was poached by the Nine Network from the Seven Network. It would be easy to see the many incarnations of Superman, including this version, simply as a product marketed in different fashions, but the creators of Superman know that it carries meanings beyond its status as a commodity. For instance, Jenette Kahn, president of DC Comics, described Superman in 1983 as "the first god of a new mythology" (Harris, 1990, p. 236). *Lois & Clark's* appeal lay in the way it reworked familiar characters in contemporary settings, which to me relied on a sense of nostalgia.

Mythology

Otto Friedrich asserted in 1988 that it is "one of the odd paradoxes about Superman...that while he is a hero of nostalgia, the constant changes in his character keep destroying the qualities that make him an object of nostalgia" (Friedrich, 1988, p. 74). But those changes contribute to the nostalgia about Superman, because the character operates in a mythological dimension, which gives it a form of consistency at a symbolic level. The symbolic resonance of Superman is important in uniting diverse forms, including versions to be discussed later in this chapter as well as the comic book "imaginary tales," which are not held to be part of the main narrative of the Superman comic books but are a sort of apocrypha that further enhances the character's mythological dimension.

Umberto Eco described Superman in a 1972 article as a mythological virtuous archetype locked in a timeless state and thereby never fully consumed by his audience (Eco, 1972). That is, Superman offers infinite possibilities for storytelling focused on virtue, but Superman's virtue is limited and the character's dimensions set by the prevailing social order. Eco's Superman then acts as an instructive tool for what passes as virtue in society, and Superman's popularity at any given time is probably in direct relationship to his creators' success in capturing a dominant mood. In effect, Superman is a product by which we consume virtue. Here it is also worth keeping in mind Claude Levi-Strauss's notion that myth recycles earlier versions of the myth as part of its status (Levi-Strauss, 1968).

Eco's explanation of Superman's status remains convincing because it explains the popularity of different versions of Superman and it touches on the character's position as a consumer durable. Among the numerous earlier incarnations of Superman, four stand out as touchstones in the hero's career. In each version Superman displayed a virtue tied explicitly to his time and locale. The original Superman, who made his debut in *Action Comics* in 1938, molded the entire legend, but in a way that was substantially altered by the second version, which took shape during World War II and tied the character to America's fortunes. Although numerous other versions, including a movie serial and a radio show, intervened between the comic book versions of Superman and the 1950s television show, the TV show is an important third version of Superman because it introduced many of the baby-boomer generation to

the hero. It also introduced the important new medium of television to the character's presentation, a medium that continues to influence the portrayal of Superman. The first two entries in the motion picture series starring Christopher Reeves represent a fourth version of Superman, in this case involving both blockbuster action hero and sexually liberated man. Alongside *Lois & Clark,* important later versions of Superman have appeared in two comic book series: *Superman: The Man of Steel* (1986) and *Kingdom Come* (1997). These last three versions have all had to deal in their own way with the character's history. Whether or not one of these versions, or a mixture of parts of these versions, will coalesce into a hallmark of a particular era of the Superman character is not yet clear. The ebbs and flows of the character's development become clearer with the passing of time and the contextualization that history offers.

From the New Deal to the American Way

Both Andrae (1987) and Gordon (1998) have shown that the Superman of the first two years of *Action Comic* was somewhat of a reformist liberal, albeit one given to direct action. In his early years Superman saved a woman mistakenly condemned for murder, confronted a wife beater, prevented the United States from becoming embroiled in a European conflict, destroyed slums to force the government to build better housing (if one considers modern high-rise apartment blocks of the type built for the poor an improvement), tore down a car factory because its shoddy products caused deaths, and fought a corrupt police force. In this version, Superman's virtue was tied to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal politics, America's 1930s isolationism, and the reality of life in Cleveland where his creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster lived. This somewhat anarchic Superman captured an audience of young fans who probably reveled in his short-cut solutions to social problems and defiance of conventional authority. But this Superman was short-lived.

Beginning in the latter half of 1940, Superman was transformed into a symbol of more general American cultural values in that his individualism was tied to consumerist values. Superman's metamorphosis resulted from the confluence of a morality campaign directed at comic books, Superman's increasing commercial value, and the advent of a heightened patriotism with the growing realization that America would

be drawn into the European war. Toward the end of 1940, Superman's publishers, DC Comics, instituted an advisory board of psychologists and child educators in response to a public campaign and legislation against comic books that transgressed public morals. New guidelines for Superman stories prohibited—among other things—the destruction of private property. At the same time Superman himself had become an important piece of private property. DC Comics licensed numerous Superman products, generating over a million dollars of profit in 1940 (Gaines, 1991, passim; Gordon, 1998, pp. 135–137; Kobler, 1941, p. 76).

At first the relationship between the creators of Superman and the commercialism of Superman was strained. DC Comics had purchased all rights to Superman from Siegel and Shuster for $100. Unhappy with their loss of revenue and critical of the company's treatment of them, Siegel and Shuster got a measure of revenge by creating a bitter parody of the marketing of Superman products. In their story, Nick Williams, a shoddy businessman, steals Superman's name to sell a range of goods including bathing suits and automobiles (Siegel & Shuster, 1938). However, by 1941, Siegel and Shuster had negotiated a better deal with DC, probably as part of their arrangement to produce the new comic strip version, whereby they received 5% of all Superman royalties. (Gordon, 1998, p. 135). Thereafter, their Superman stories began to contain plugs for the various products (Siegel & Shuster, 1941).

Myth Making

The commercialization of Superman was in part responsible for the character becoming an American icon. On America's entry into World War II, the defense of the "American Way of Life," which posited the promise of consumer choice in a market of goods as the basis of a democratic society, became an important cry to rally the troops. Countless advertisements sought to mobilize the nation for war by directing consumption into appropriate expenditures that would ensure victory and lay the basis for a post-war democracy of goods. Both the government and advertisers depicted the war as a test of national resolve to curtail expectations to defend and ensure a way of life. Superman with his new respect for authority, his anarchic youthful past, and his iconization as a commodity represented that way of life. The U.S. Army recognized

Superman's importance in 1943 and distributed 100,000 copies of the comic book to overseas troops every other month until late 1944, when the practice was discontinued because the comic book was readily available through Post Exchange stores. Shortly after the end of the war, the Superman line of comic books averaged monthly sales of 8,500,000 (Gordon, 1998, p. 149).

Subsequent versions of the character demonstrated this shift of character from iconoclast individualistic liberal reformer to mainstream liberal organizational man. From time to time the producers of Superman found it necessary to address how the commodification of Superman is situated in the Superman mythology. For instance, in the first season of *Lois & Clark,* an episode played with Superman's history as a commodity and drew in part on the 1938 Siegel & Shuster story. In the episode, Clark/Superman struggled to find his true self as his fame resulted in numerous Superman products such as dolls and soft drinks. An agent, straight out of vaudeville, approached Superman with commercial endorsement offers including one to go to Cleveland—an in-joke recognizable to those aware that Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created Superman while teenagers living in Cleveland. Eventually Clark/Superman decided that he controlled his own destiny and no manner of commercial product would affect his true self. Nonetheless he agreed to the licensing of his name provided that the profits went to charity.

The different plot devices in the two similar tales highlight an important difference between the 1938 Superman and the 1990s Superman. In the 1938 story the plot is driven by the shoddy business practices of Nick Williams, who seeks to commercialize Superman for his own benefit. The similarity between Siegel and Shuster's loss of their property rights to DC Comics, and Superman's difficulty in controlling the use of his name, makes the story a critique of business practices and a satire of commercialization. The *Lois & Clark* episode suggested that the producers recognized they must acknowledge, in some way, Superman's status as a commodity. The story is not about commercialization (that is a given) but about a character's true self. The story suggests that we need not be affected by the commodification of everything if we remain true to ourselves. This resolution of the problems of Superman's commercialization was inevitable given that the show was produced by Warner Brothers Television, part of the media conglomerate that acquired DC comics and thereby the Superman trademark in the late 1960s for their

licensing value. The outcome also stresses the role of individual over social forces in producing character, in the moral sense, thereby affirming Superman's adherence to individualism, another tenet of the American way. Moreover, the *Lois & Clark* episode retells a story from Superman's history in such a way that the concept of virtue is transformed from a rejection of commercialization to the preservation of individualism. Beyond the issue of commercialization, *Lois & Clark*, and its popularity in Australia, suggests new ways of examining the link between nostalgia, mythology, and commodification.

Probably most Australian viewers of *Lois & Clark* first saw Superman either in the 1950s television show or in the movies starring Christopher Reeve. The television Superman of the 1950s replicated the themes of the World War II comic book Superman and literally wrapped the character in the stars and stripes in the show's opening credits. The show appealed to its primary audience of children, in most part because they shared the secret of Superman's dual identity as Clark Kent. Although Lois Lane had her suspicions, in general she and the show's other adult characters were too slow-witted or blinded by their own preconceptions to recognize Clark and Superman as one and the same. This identification was reinforced by Clark's constant winking asides to the audience. For children, this Superman's most obvious virtue lay in his treatment of them as equals to the exclusion of adults. The undercurrent of attraction and tension between Superman and Lois Lane heightened the sense of audience superiority because we, unlike Lois, knew she already had the regular contact with Superman, albeit in the guise of Clark Kent, that she desired.

For baby-boomer Australians, the 1950s Superman television show provided one of the first contacts with the new medium. If my own experience is anything to go by, the show also acted as a minor flash point in a generational conflict. My parents at best tolerated Superman as the unfortunate but inevitable dross that came with the new medium. For me the show was an escape from the more traditionally educational BBC-derived children's programming. American programs like Superman offered a glimpse of a different society and yet one seemingly in reach of Australians. Superman was *my* show as opposed to my parents' show.

Such anecdotes are the narratives on which nostalgia is often built. That Superman is invoked in anecdotes of childhood adds to the

commodity value of Superman as brand name. These sort of narratives may be intensely personal, but the sentiment embedded in them gains significance not only in the repetition of the story but also at a material level when the creators of the narratives live out those sentiments by watching a television show, collecting comic books, or seeing the latest movie.

Let me then add some other anecdotes. A colleague of mine at the University of Southern Queensland remarked that his father, a politicized working-class unionist, had watched the 1950s television Superman and read it through a resistance practice as a satire. For him the show stood for all of the excessive claims America made about itself. An old friend of mine, an art theorist at the Queensland University of Technology, told me that she had not watched the recent *Lois & Clark* series or the 1950s show but had avidly read Superman comics as a child (in the early 1960s) and had seen the movies. A more senior colleague from the University of New South Wales told me that his first contact with the character was through an Australian radio serial in the 1950s, with Leonard Teale, a well-known local actor, as Superman. Likewise, in an account of her Indian childhood the writer Anita Desai cites Superman comic books as an indicator of the diversity of "Anglo-Indian" culture (Desai, 2000). These are very different memories than mine about the character and probably all tinged with a sense of nostalgia. It is important to note, however, that they suggest ways in which the myth can contain different aspects and versions of itself. Such memories also demonstrate how a figure such as Superman can transcend the culture of its creation and become embedded in another.

If baby-boomers remembered Superman fondly and claimed him as their own, the movie version of the late 1970s and early 1980s gave them a chance to relive those memories and introduce their children to the character. The movie Superman retained the essential characteristics of the hero with one important addition. The sexual tension and attraction between Superman and Lois formed an important element of the movies. Most notably, in the second movie Lois and Superman had sexual intercourse, although this required Superman losing, temporarily as it turned out, his super powers. For baby boomers, Superman and Lois Lane's sexual liaison repositioned Superman as a hero of his times. Superman gave up his powers for a sexual relationship, and at the same time fulfilled the fantasy of many fans. But ultimately Superman's destiny is

to be super, and so he sacrificed his relationship with Lois to regain his powers and save the world. When he reassumed his Superman status, Lois forgot about their relationship. These incidents took place in the second of the movies. The third in the series had a less serious tone, being closer in feel to the camp 1960s Batman television series. The fourth, released in 1985, took a high moral ground on nuclear weapons and met with a lukewarm reception.

Nostalgic Renderings

Having traced these incarnations of Superman, I want to point to an intersection between mythologizing and nostalgia in the movie and recent television versions of Superman. Mythology allows the hero to appear in different guises and forms and yet remain the hero. Nostalgia contains a sense of loss. So in this particular intersection while the hero is still present, something has been lost. The Superman movies of the early 1980s gave us a symbol from many of our childhoods in a form that legitimized the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. The sexual congress of Lois and Clark represented no loss of virtue and indeed helped remake and legitimize our concepts of virtue. At the very least, both the sexual revolution and a sexualized Superman represented a destabilization of an established order. Perhaps in the versions of Superman the mythical figure provides the sense of stability and continuity that we nostalgically long for, but the refiguring of the myth allows for human agency on behalf of the character's creators.

The version of Superman displayed in *Lois & Clark* embodies all the above-mentioned versions of Superman. For instance, the series recalls the 1950s television series in numerous ways, including the ongoing sparring between Perry White and Jimmy Olsen, but most notably the inclusion, albeit briefly, of Police Inspector Henderson, a character unsighted in any other version of Superman. Most importantly the show's title indicates that if there is to be a relationship, it will be between Lois and Clark. The movie versions suggested that the only way Superman could consummate a sexual relationship with Lois was to forgo his powers, a non-super Superman being the embodiment of Clark Kent. In the movies Clark was somewhat foppish and Superman, well, a super man. In *Lois & Clark,* Clark is a sensitive young man, but by no means a

fop. In the movies the relationship between Superman and Lois threatened his superness, or, if you like, his manness. In the latest television series, Superman's manliness is strengthened and developed through his relationships with Lois and his parents. It is also worth noting that in *Lois & Clark* both the characters were identified as virgins, whereas in the movie versions Lois clearly had a past.

In *Lois & Clark* we can see nostalgia for aspects of the 1950s that were undermined by the sexual revolution. I believe the series allows us a glimpse of how nostalgia can reshape and redirect social values even if through highly commodified mythical forms. The exact way in which this nostalgia plays out and the values expressed through a form such as Superman comes back to human agency. It is not too outrageous to note that there is a world of difference between the 1938 comic book Superman and the 1994 television series Superman, and that that difference in some way can be explained by the difference between two Depression-era teenage boys Siegel and Shuster and the post-feminist women producers of *Lois & Clark.* Les Daniels, the more-or-less official historian of DC Comics, has commented that *Lois & Clark* was mostly about two good-looking people getting it on; a romance novel with pictures (Daniels, 1998, p. 173).

Lois & Clark then captured a certain audience for the Superman character. There are, however, other audiences, and while the superhero–comic-book-buying public may not be the mass audience it once was, having been whittled down to a limited group of adolescent males, comic books are still an important part of the Superman narrative. Since 1986 Superman has been reborn at least twice, and possibly thrice if an "imaginary tale" or an "elseworlds" story (as they are now known) is included, in comic books. In 1985, DC Comics initiated a "Crisis on Infinite Earths" series to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary and in part to give order to its vast array of characters. The outcome of the series wiped the slate clean, and all DC characters began anew.

In a six-part mini-series in 1986, writer/artist John Byrne retold the familiar tale of Superman's origin. His version owed something to the Superman movies that preceded it and laid the basis for the *Lois & Clark* television series that followed. Byrne touched on many of the major themes of Superman, including the commercialism associated with celebrity. In trimming away some of "the barnacles" that DC had attached to Superman, Byrne retained and expanded the role of adoptive parents

Martha and Jonathan Kent. In the final episode of the series, Byrne highlighted the immigrant status of Superman, who concludes that America/Earth "gave me all that I am" and "all that matters" (Byrne, 1986). Such a conclusion addressed Superman's history. Although the narrative begins again anew, it also recycles the past allowing the "all that I am" to include the many prior incarnations of the character.

In the introduction to the collected Ballatine Books edition of the series, Byrne wrote of his childhood memories of Superman. Born in England in 1950, Byrne first encountered the character in the 1950s television show and later in black-and-white comic book reprints. For Byrne it was a window into another world.

Byrne saw the task at hand in the series as recreating "Superman as a character more in tune with the needs of the modern comic book audience." He also hopes that his version of the character will inspire some to follow in his footsteps and discover a lifetime's work through the window (Byrne, 1988, n.p.). Byrne's nostalgia about his childhood encounter with Superman, the dreams it inspired, and his eventual arrival in the USA, by way of Canada, suggest that his Superman's "humanity" rests in Byrne's own journey. If that is the case then Byrne's vision of Superman rests on a version of America, or the America of the imagination, as a land of opportunity for immigrants. At the same time, though, Byrne presents Superman's sense of self as deriving from values instilled in him by his parents and a place: America/Kansas/Smallville. The Superman story then also embodies an ideology of assimilation. That this tale was originally sketched by two Jewish teens, Siegel and Shuster, perhaps adds a dimension to this feature, but the important point is how stories told and re-told retain their symbolic features. Superman demonstrates that being American is a state of mind achievable by adopting a set of values. The ideological dimensions of this are multi-variant. Such an ideology might shut off competing notions of what it is to be American, or it might open up a debate on what values are American. On another register, however, this aspect of Superman suggests to his non-U. S. readers that they too can be Americans if they so choose.

The second rebirth of Superman in comic books occurred, according to Les Daniels, as a direct result of DC Comics selling the ABC network on the idea of the *Lois & Clark* show (Daniels, 1998, p. 166). In 1990 the comic book version of Superman had been building to a wedding between Lois Lane and Clark Kent. DC decided to hold off the comic book wedding to coincide with the television series version. Consequently the comic book writers, who were producing four separate comic book titles a month, had to develop a new storyline. The result was the infamous death of Superman in the January 1993 issue of *Superman*, which on the wave of media hype sold some six million copies, many to people who thought they were investing in a collector's item. Superman returned from the dead in a comic book with an October 1993 cover date, and the scheduled wedding eventually took place in late 1996 in both the comic book and the television versions. The hype over the "death" of Superman and the subsequent reaction to his rebirth helped cause a slump in the comic book market, with thousands of direct sale stores closing and revenues that had reached a billion dollars being cut in half (Brodie, 1996). Blaming a gullible press, Daniels suggests in his history of Superman that DC was not directly responsible for this hype, but nonetheless DC fed the demand by reprinting the comic book (Daniels, 1998, pp. 168–169). This crass commercialism may well have undercut the symbolic worth of Superman for the comic book audience, and explains in part the initial low audience numbers for the television show in the United States. In any case, the downturn in the comic book market saw publishers developing many new projects in an attempt to regain lost ground. One of these projects involved a third rebirth of Superman and a significant contribution to the character's mythology based on nostalgia.

The third rebirth occurred in *Kingdom Come*, a special series of four comic books in DC's Elseworlds series. As DC puts it: "In Elseworlds, heroes are taken from their usual settings and put into strange times and places—some that have existed or might have existed, and others that can't, couldn't or shouldn't exist" (*Kingdom Come*, 1997, verso title page). The story strengthened and enhanced the mythological dimensions of Superman by demonstrating the symbolic values at the character's core. The production values of the book, in which the art was painted rather than drawn and colored, indicated the audience and expectations DC had for the book. The series has been gathered together and published as a hardback complete with introduction and an "Apocrypha" section, which suggests that DC takes rather seriously its claims that Superman is a new god. In the superlative-laden introduction, Elliot S! (sic) Maggin writes: "This Is The Iliad...this is a story about truth obscured, justice deferred and the American way distorted in the hands

of petty semanticists." Here Maggin deliberately evokes the 1950s television show and its phrase "truth, justice and the American way" to stir memories of Superman. Maggin goes on to declare *Kingdom Come*, a message of values and iconography to future generations. *Kingdom Come*, as Maggin states explicitly, is about filling out the values associated with Superman (Maggin, 1997, pp. 6–7).

The story presented in *Kingdom Come* is that of the hero in exile and pretenders occupying his place. That Superman has imposed this exile on himself and that the pretenders are also superheroes is but little matter in the mythological dimensions of the story. But in the economy of comic book production in which a glut of massively muscled gung-ho superheroes and villains (think of the Hulk on steroids) have challenged the market strength of earlier generations of comic book heroes, this aspect of the story can be viewed as yet another level of nostalgia for simple times. In *Kingdom Come* an earlier generation of superheroes has retired, dismayed by Superman abandoning his "never-ending battle." The use of this phrase, also drawn from the 1950s television show and highlighted in bold, drives home the message that the Superman of *Kingdom Come* is an aged version of the 1950s character whose parents and wife have died and who wears the mantle of his "humanity" heavily.

The hero returns from his exile, as inevitably he must in such mythology. His return is triggered when an errant latter-day superhero named Magog carelessly savages a super-powered opponent who, in reaction, manages to attack and "split open" another hero, Captain Atom, resulting in a nuclear explosion. This battle occurs in Kansas, and the entire state becomes a nuclear wasteland as a result of the explosion. In most workings of Superman's origins, Kansas is his boyhood home. After the destruction of Kansas, the remaining superheroes lose all sense of responsibility. The story's choral figure, a preacher, observes this state of affairs, suggesting "now more than ever we need hope!" And then a gust of wind and the words "Look!" "Up in the sky!"—words introduced to the Superman mythos by the late 1930s radio serial—lead to a full-page panel of Superman. But although he has returned, all is not well because of the rage he contains, which is cued visually by the background of the red S on his costume being black instead of the usual yellow. Humanity, represented by the United Nations Council, is not altogether happy with this return and the realities of power it reveals.

The story builds to a conflict between humanity and superheroes.

Superman is deeply conflicted, but retains a moral code: he does not kill. In yet another piece of nostalgia, Superman reminds Batman of when they were the World's Finest team—a reference both to a DC comic that featured team adventures of the two and to their common humanity. When the United Nations seeks to restore order by destroying super humans, who despite Superman's presence threaten humanity through their conflicts, Superman seeks revenge on the UN but is quickly brought back to earth by a reminder of his humanity. In the denouement, Superman dons his Clark Kent glasses, which are not so much a disguise but a reminder of his humanity. In the epilogue, Superman and Wonder Woman announce to Batman that they want him to raise their soon-to-be-born child to ensure his humanity. And in the penultimate panel the three decide that he, or she, will be a "battler for Truth, Justice, and a New American Way."

This equation of the generalities of humanity with the specifics of America might at first seem a slippage brought on by the desire to play with the language of other versions of Superman. But nostalgia and the mythological dimensions of the character drive this desire. The sentiment is transformed into something of significance through the act of retelling the narrative. In this story the authors have strengthened Superman's trust in his humanity, but the very manner of telling the story has reduced humanity to "American." *Kingdom Come* then has the affect of closing off some of the possibilities offered by the nostalgic musings about Superman I recounted earlier in this essay. But of course this is just one version of the character.

Conclusion

Superman is a commodity, a registered trademark, which belongs to the Time Warner conglomerate. He is a product that must be sold to justify the investment in DC Comics. The Six Flags Theme Park's Superman ride that opened in March 1997 underscores the commodity status of the name. Advertised in the words of the 1950s television series, the ride is "faster than a speeding bullet," and "more powerful than a locomotive"—seemingly an outmoded metaphor until one realizes that the ride is literally more powerful, accelerating from zero to 100 miles per hour in 7 seconds and providing 6.5 seconds of weightlessness—but is con-

nected to the comic book character in name only. A new movie version of Superman—*Superman Reborn*—directed by Tim Burton with Nicholas Cage in the title role did not move beyond pre-production, but yet another version of the character was in development. In April 2000 DC Comics announced plans for Stan Lee, the long-time doyen of Marvel Comics, to produce a series of comics for DC under the title *Just Imagine Stan Lee Creating*, starting the lives of many characters, including Superman, from birth. The wire service release notes that Lee recently established his own media company, Stan Lee Media, "to extend his globally recognized brand name...to all niche markets of the global popular culture." The wire also notes that Branded Entertainment's Michael Uslan, a producer of Warners' Batman movies, initiated the project ("Superman and Batman Join Forces," 2000). Yet another television version of Superman was announced on September 19, 2000 by The WB Network, which placed a "Teenage Clark Kent Project" into development (Adalian & Schneider, 2000).

Superman demonstrates that aspects of our past can continually be reinvented and *re*-presented to us. That our nostalgia brings with it loaded stories is but one ideological aspect of this reinvention. By tying popular memory to marketable figures, nostalgia has become a way of owning the past. This past owes little to history and is in effect a disembodied commodity. Nostalgia has become the pleasure of consumption.

Note

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