

## The Outdatedness of Superheroism? The Condition of the Superhero Myth: Past and Today

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The myth of a superhero -- or, as will be referred to in due course -- the superheroic mythos has been unquestionably gaining recognition of late. Its contents and form have, however, substantially evolved as compared to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the paradigm shaped by two major publishing houses: DC Comics (formerly, National Allied Publications) and Marvel Comics (formerly, Timely Comics). The growing interest in superheroes tied to the actual geopolitical and economic situation of the country. For instance, Superman was born amid worldwide war tensions of 1938 as the manifestation of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, whereas a year later, in 1939, the American dream was mirrored in Batman, followed in 1941, by Wonder Woman and Captain America. The birth of the aforementioned and many akin characters in the years to come has substantially influenced the American comic book market and, as of late, also audiovisual media.

The immense popularity of superheroes is observed nowadays alike, as proved by the rising box office figures of movie blockbusters pivoted around the heroic fight against the (always personified) evil, as well as by game adaptations allowing to role play as favorite characters and wield their supernatural powers. No less relevant are multiplying fan theories expanding on the events known from comic books, novels, animated or actor movies (see, *Avengers: Koniec...*), and the rising accessibility of licensed merchandise such as figurines, playing cards, cosplay suits, etc. It is worth noting that every premiere of consecutive Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) or DC Extended Universe (DCEU) installments is led by months-extending advertisement campaigns that attract the crowding fans of their beloved superheroes. This was perhaps best visible in the case of "Avengers: Endgame" which already hit the \$2,189 million mark in global sales, surpassing "Titanic"'s \$2,188 million, and approximating "Avatar"'s \$2,788 million world record" (*Avengers: Endgame...*). Such is the result of this unique experiment to approach the movie world as a series bridging different conventions and vibes in one, consistent narrative arc. This success is owed, however, not only to the plot or narrative itself, but also to the mentioned marketing efforts that have been fueling viewers' expectations for over a year prior to the movie release. A key role was played by super heroic characters themselves -- so prototypal for Marvel Comics in general, so following the moral code, wielding superhuman powers, but, simultaneously, ironic, objective, often cynical, or even flawed. Their credibility is grounded in the

unyielding actions undertaken within the frustrating ethical sphere of many moral shades of grey -- one, therefore, that defines our existence as well.

The biggest rival of Marvel in the American market has been DC Comics. Superheroes appearing on pages of their publications have too followed the impeccable moral code (often akin to knight's oaths or samurai's bushidō) -- but also differentiated themselves by presenting lineages rooted deep in the ancient mythical or biblical lore. Quite surprisingly, these are not as much of interest for the general public as their more contemporary equivalents, fighting in the realistic metropolises. It is worth emphasizing that the production of DC Extended Universe, despite presenting characters such as Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, or Flash, has not attracted that much attention since, as argued by Adrian Turzański:

In the opening weekend, *The Justice League* earned \$93.8 million in the United States, whereas the world sales amounted for \$185 million. The movie directed by Zack Snyder with the all-star cast featuring Ben Affleck, Henry Cavill, Gal Gadot, Jason Momoa, and Ezra Miller --earned a total of \$278.8 million for Warner Bros. This was not a satisfactory result for the company which counted on an opening reaching at least 110 million dollars in home box office. Unfortunately, the production did not attract that many fans to the movie theatres. None of the previous productions composing the DC Extended Universe took off so poorly. The overall situation does not improve by cold reviews that the film continues to collect.

One can ponder whether the brutal, realist battle scenes or deeper psychological introspection of the characters -- that demands much greater viewer's focus on the presented history, its multifacetedness, or complex character motivations -- amount for a lower popularity of DC Universe movies as compared to their MCU counterparts. Quite probably, DC productions intend to appeal to the more engaged, well-versed viewer that displays a certain degree of cultural knowledge enabling them to better understand the original intention -- that is of the iconic, "memified" superhero that has evolved throughout the many ages, reflecting the peculiarities of a given time and then-desired virtues.

Seemingly, the immense rise in the popularity of superheroes -- that have originated, in modern culture, mainly from comic books, and pulp science or fantasy fiction -- should result in the corresponding growth of the interest in comic books. Quite unexpectedly, however, in post-1989 Poland, we can observe the increase of comic books sales only recently when a number of diverse comic publications continue to appear on the market thanks to the leading publishing house in this sector, Egmont, but also Hachette -- which "have broken the ossified publishing oligopoly (Lesicki, n.d.: 88) -- and a number of other houses pivoted on Polish comic books or more niche titles. Simultaneously, the number of published comic books is still lower than the one associated with book sales. As observed by Paweł Ciolkiewicz (2013:

95), in the global context: "(...) publishing houses register permanent declines in sales, losing competition on the market with movies and computer games. The superhero comic book remains still the best-selling genre, but the publishers more and more openly reproduce well-known patterns and utilize stereotyped narrative devices." Over the past couple of years DC and Marvel Comics successively renew and retell their iconic narratives, showing new origin stories of superheroes -- which can be considered a sign of a new tendency on the superheroic comic book market.

An ever-changing publishing and comic book market somewhat forces publishers to update the published content by adjusting it to the contemporaneous time as well as actual cultural and social tastes. Creators thereby, knowing that new books featuring their iconic vigilantes keep on coming and that they need to approach new readership, strive for a far-fetched ideological progressivism. It does not boil down, however, to showing new technological inventions in the fight against the evil, but to more contemporary references to the phenomena observed in the rapidly changing society: homosexuality, feminism, home abuse, depression, oppression against the minorities, tech addiction, and more. Such histories are often ideologized in order to mirror the actual social mood quite often backgrounded demographically. This, however, is not always beneficial for the comic book medium, much less to the individual history or a superheroic character.

But let us return briefly to the concept of myth. Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz (1985: 79), quite aptly said that:

Comic art gave birth to a multitude of heroes that penetrated contemporary civilizational imagination by crafting a new and original (...) mythology. It seems that this creation was accompanied by a special anatomy of the comic book character -- an amalgam of reality and myth, as well as action story with the perennial idea of the archetype that serves as a grounding for an oneiric vibe of the comic book narrative.

It is worth considering why superhero narratives often utilize the very concept of myth -- and how the latter is actually understood. This issue was addressed by Wojciech Burszta (2013: IX) who said that:

The myth is everything and nothing: a true history happening on an extraordinary set or a false revelation or even a lie. It can be sacral or quotidian, real or fictional, archetypal or stereotypical, logically structured or prelogically emotional, rooted in traditional and primitive cultures or present in contemporary ideologies. As we know, myth can consider gods or primordial ancestors and founding fathers, but it remains, simultaneously, a story of ordinary people. It is a recurring, universal cultural theme [emphasis mine], a record of a timeless idea, half-truth, or a straightforward lie. It is an illness of language or a very structure of mind.

leads us to the words of Daniel Fingerth (2004: 17), who claimed that a hero is always a hallmark or paragon of actual values shared among the majority of a given society, remaining at the same time a framework for studying the morality of a certain social group. Owing to that, the recipient -- formerly majorly the reader, nowadays both the reader and (above all) the viewer -- is able to self-compensate his desires while bearing witness to the fight between the protagonist and the antagonist that symbolize, respectively, good and evil. One should also add that the main narrative arc concerns predominantly the superhero, focusing on his/her nemesis much less frequently.<sup>1</sup> Popular heroes are shaped in a way for their fans to identify with in regard to their struggles, desires, and longings. Thereby, fans can be provided with a sense of catharsis, in addition to a certain level of escapism -- and visit a world where the good is always triumphant even having been succumbed to the sacrifices on the altar of plot consistency. One should also add that comic book tales hugely impact young readers, assisting, in a way, in their socialization, as they provide them with lessons of morality as well as with parables of citizenship grounded in the virtues of brotherhood and solidarity.

Umberto Eco (2008: 11) argued that "episodic novel replaces dreams: but, at the same time, prompts them, as a daydream comes true which channels them into an idea of revenge, punishment of the guilty for the suffered pain." Correspondingly, in ancient mythology or the Judeo-Christian Bible, heroes walked the Earth, descendants from the gods wielding supernatural powers, entrusted with protecting mankind against evils and wrongdoings: from monsters to evil overlords. In return, they were worshipped alive, their names featured in songs, bringing glory to their deeds (Kopaliński, 2008: 418). Myths, indeed, were originally supposed to describe the rules governing the world along with its genesis, creation, and the actions of gods. No wonder, then, that the majority of mythical narratives were pivoted around these phenomena. Because of their universal character and meaning, they quickly became well-known, even despite losing certain details while progressing across different regions of the world -- which nonetheless contributed to an even greater level of universality. Perceived as tales of collective wisdom or a code of ethical conduct, they also quickly adopted more sacral meanings. As explained by Mircea Eliade (n.d.: 95):

The myth relates a sacred history, that is, a primordial event that took place at the beginning of time, *ab initio*. But to relate a sacred history is equivalent to

The absolute truth in Eliade's reading is a mystery revealed in the contemporary superheroic myth as well. Interestingly, superheroes are present in almost every culture nowadays which can point at the universality of their stories, usage of timeless archetypes in the narrative, the primordial will to display a struggle of good against evil, chaos against order, or law against crime. And here comes also the problem of monomyth, as understood by Jędrzej Burszta, who defined it after Joseph Campbell as a set of "timeless topics that differ according to a certain cultural rendition, but still can be reconstructed as a part of the grand mythical narrative" (Burszta, 2013: IX). It is easy to compare well-known superheroic myths with Campbell's monomyth. It turns out, mainly, that over the last eighty years of comic book evolution -- beginning with the year of publication of the first Superman comic book -- the overall meaning of the narrative of the superhero has only slightly changed, following the adaptation towards more actual norms of values, changing social moods, and the increasing usage of newer technologies. The society longs for myths and, as once again noted by Burszta, Campbell "too believed that the individual, in order to lead a meaningful life, has to live alongside myths, all the more the contemporary society lacks mythical grounding in a particularly painful way" (Burszta, 2013: XVI). It is popular culture -- and, especially, its focus on superheroic narratives -- that helps to fill in this void.

The Jungian archetype theory also may be of some interest here, as long as we remember its association with the "interpretation of dreams, which, in turn, depends on the interpretation of symbols" (Burszta, 2013: XI). Carl Gustav Jung also claimed that "what the concept of 'archetype' means, certainly quite clearly frames (...) the references to the myth, the secret doctrine, as well as to the fairy tale" (Jung, 2012: 13). However, the student of Freud primarily referred to the unconscious and yet common for the collective, to a certain extent hereditary, even though yet unrealized by the individual. Understood as such, the archetype displays a manifestation of collective wisdom and, concurrently, retains its values of timelessness and universal accessibility for a given social group. In this sense, one could interpret a given superhero story as the extended experience of the hero's journey -- a journey along the road challenging his/her character and capabilities and composing an existential dimension common to every human being.

Superheroes featured in the DC universe encompass this mythical, superhuman origin. Wonder Woman, also known as Diane Prince, was born



in the Amazon, fathered by the Greek god Zeus and the Amazonian queen Hippolyta. Superman represents an alien race inhabiting the planet of Krypton and his true name is Kal-L (hence the sobriquet of Clark Kent). Wielding superhuman powers that he utilized to defend mankind from a variety of evil threats, he was meant to mirror the life and deeds of Moses and his quest to lead the people of Israel out of their slavery in Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Willing to fight in the name of good, Clark started to bring social justice upon corrupted politicians, dishonest landlords, or even assaulted housewives, all with the help of his superpowers and sharpened senses. Constant attacks on the Metropolis' authorities and congressmen made Superman not a hero, but a self-proclaimed vigilante, a true fighter for social justice. At the same time, however, he was treated as a defender and a statesman by the ordinary people and the oppressed (Ostrowski, n.d.). The concept of Aquaman (in selected series referred to as Arthur Curry, which could be an allusion to the legend of King Arthur), quite differently, has changed over time. In the beginning, he was described as a son of an ocean explorer, then -- a child of a lamplighter and a mysterious escapee from Atlantis, later on -- a descendant of half-god Atlan and Queen Atlanna. In the movie from 2018 he was portrayed as a child of a lamplighter and Atlanna who was supposed to flee from Atlantis to avoid being forced into marriage with an unloved man. Among Aquaman's attributes was a trident, commonly associated with Poseidon (Neptune), which only strengthened the Roman-Greek references for the reader coming from Eurocentric cultural background.

A typical (mythical) hero has to embark on a journey to become who he/she needs to become and fulfil his/her destiny. According to Campbell, this journey follows a structured scheme. It starts with leaving one's current place of residence and a community therein, then proceeds with the stages of overcoming the obstacles and completing the entrusted quest. In the end, the hero is welcomed back by his relatives which does not have to be easy, since he perceives the world from a different perspective, having widened his horizon and having estranged himself from the home community (Campbell, 2004: 28-29). As observed by Paweł Ciołkiewicz in this very context:

These universal narrative structures can be also traced in the adventures of superheroes, with a couple of significant differences. (...) The basic difference between the classical version of the monomyth, designed in the 30s, and its American counterpart is that the former is based on the rite of passage, while the latter is built around the narrative of salvation. (...) It is both about the good of the individual and the community, whereas the rite itself -- by the separation of the individual and suspending it in the liminal phase -- ultimately leads to reintegration. The individual, having been subjected to the trials, reunites then with the community (Ciołkiewicz, 2013: 98).

The American version of the monomyth is, quite obviously, particularly visible in the super heroic comic book and its movie or serialized adaptations.

The majority of characters, as long as not involved in the destruction of populated cities, is warmly welcomed by grateful communities. In order to depict a society in its full picture, superheroes fight not only with antagonistic villains, but also with the police forces (or authorities per se) which can be seen in the *Avengers* or *Justice League* series.

Viewing stats also confirm that movies are of much greater interest to recipients than comic book editions. It is worth mentioning that the British director, Christopher Nolan, responsible for the *Dark Knight* trilogy, focused in his depiction of Batman not on CGI effects (although they remain sublime), but -- above all -- on the psychological depth of the eponymous Dark Knight figure.<sup>3</sup> Nolan is primarily interested in "The boundary between truth and fabrication, between being asleep and awake, in the threat of anarchy and madness when this boundary blurs or vanishes, in the mystery of a mind that ceased to discern one from another" (Sadowska, n.d.). From the premiere of *Batman Begins* (2005), through *The Dark Knight* (2008), and up until *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), the director has secured a strong grasp of superhero cinema (Agar, n.d.). His idea to combine super heroic convention with realist means of representation has been not only critically acclaimed, but also has succeeded in the deheroization of the Batman mythos and the superhero as such.

Staying focused on the Dark Knight example, it would be worth mentioning that it is also the super heroic imagery that is of utmost importance, along with three characteristic features: a distinguishing trait (superhuman strength or intellectual prowess, underwater breathing, flying, expertise in martial arts, etc.), a suitable costume (designed as a disguise), and a sobriquet or pseudonym (which protects the identity of superheroes and their loved ones or relatives that could be likely targeted by their enemies). Such costumes usually undergo numerous modifications over time. Batman's costume (changes of which triggered many controversies) (see, Geek, n.d.) and the batmobile were inspired by "Leonardo da Vinci's sketches depicting flying machines with bat wings" (Stachówna, 2006: 43), while both gained additional motivation in association with Bruce Wayne's childhood trauma. Having feared these very creatures, Bruce, however, decided to choose them as his sign to channel his inner fears into an image terrifying for his enemies (see, Ciołkiewicz, n.d.). Remaining a keen observer, able to camouflage in the dark, Batman was able to deduce the wrongdoings of his opponents and prevent them from happening (which was a clear reference to the character of Sherlock Holmes). To a certain degree, Batman also displays biblical roots. Just as Adam and Eve were forced to leave the Garden of Eden, having tasted the forbidden, Bruce Wayne, having been orphaned by his murdered parents, is faced with the necessity of managing himself in the cruel world. It is a story of a harmed child, a juvenile mourner trapped in the body of a muscular billionaire who tries to repel evil by projecting its aura, but never succumbing

to it, in order not to become a criminal himself. A universal tale of a man trapped in the culture as a source of his suffering -- demanding a rejection of life filled with fulfilment rather than with happiness.

One of the most important elements of Batman's costume is his mask, interpreted as key in his transformation from a wealthy playboy into the defender of Gotham; soon as it is donned, Bruce ceases to be himself and becomes Batman, acting like Batman, thinking like Batman, and following the ethical code of Batman (Probulski, 2012: 97-103). A contemporary world, however, rejects the hero of such ilk, which is clearly articulated in Nolan's trilogy where -- as emphasized by Andrzej Probulski -- only the first installment features the word "Batman" in its title, the other two rejecting its associations in favor of accepting the full transformation of human-Batman into the Dark Knight, a mythical hero, a symbol of the fight between good and evil (Probulski, 2012: 103).

Despite timeless attributes and unique meaning, Batman is now a hero of lost times and his legend starts to fade out. Contemporary technology has made such a progress, that it transgressed any prognoses from that time. Furthermore, Bruce remains the only hero from the Justice League not bestowed with any supernatural power and relying only on his prowess, wealth, and intelligence.<sup>4</sup> One could ponder, therefore, whether the character of Batman is dated or not (Fugere, 2018) -- but, paradoxically thanks to the aforementioned lack of non-human powers -- he can clearly inspire creators, recipients, and scholars alike. It could be interesting to consider, however, what would have happened if Bruce Wayne were to be deprived of his immense wealth and access to the newest technology. Would he remain Batman or, without a support of that ilk, abandoned his quest of revenge and lead a peaceful life elsewhere? Clothes do not make the man -- but, for a superhero, costume (particularly if serving particular purposes) is one of the most important attributes, a feature emphasized in a line "Without your costume, you are nothing" from the movie *SpiderMan: Homecoming*.<sup>5</sup>

In the meantime, critics and psychoanalysts argue about the necessity of vengeful crusades led by characters such as Batman or Punisher, the latter very ruthless in eliminating criminals. In times of increasing popularity of psychotherapy and general care for the psychological well-being, myths of caped and masked crusaders are no longer in place since they promote psychologically unstable individuals -- who, despite being able to manage their lives, lead it in a way that can be interpreted as an encouragement towards a destructive and obsessive lifestyle focused on fulfilling one goal only. Taken straightforwardly, such representations could be associated with socially dysfunctional deviants.

One can be entertained by how creators, particularly in such an atmosphere, try to factor social changes in the image of the Dark Knight, evolving from story to story. Less and less, he resembles a psychopath

hunting for criminals, much rather becoming a fighter who by all means escapes from erecting monuments to praise his depression and trauma. He seeks the meaning of life through his good deeds and sacrifices, even if this is grounded in a disbelief towards the purposefulness of existence after a terrible loss of loved ones. I do believe that psychotherapeutic discourses will greatly influence these fantastic narratives, as exemplified in Paul Dini's *Dark Knight: A True Batman Story* -- wherein a revered, accomplished American screenwriter manages his pain and suffering, following the survival of a street assault, by utilizing characters from bat-mythos as archetypes of specific attitudes and feelings.

To sum up, deheroization of the superhero is a visible trope nowadays. In super heroic narratives, realism (Batman) dominates (to a certain extent), while heroes die (Iron Man, Black Widow), grow old (Captain America), or choose exile (Thor). Despite their unquestionable presence in popular culture, super heroic figures do decline and become outdated. Undoubtedly, we will have to wait several decades until they -- in one form or another -- will be born anew.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> One should emphasize that comic book series or books devoted to anti-heroes are viewed as particularly interesting, particularly when displaying motivations that ground anti-heroic actions. See, Paul Dini and Pat Cadigan, *Harley Quinn: Mad Love*. London: 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Superman's creators were of Jewish origin and their religious beliefs as well as antisemitic experiences in the U.S. of the 1930s shaped the figure of the superhero.

<sup>3</sup> "No superhero movie before 'Batman Begins' has put so much pressure on the person on the other side of the mask -- a man who decides to become the avenger and explore his psychological motivations." See, Christopher Nolan. *Wszystko, co musicie wiedzieć przed premiera Dunkierki* [online] <https://newonce.net/2017/07/christopher-nolan-wszystko-co-musicie-wiedziec-przed-premiera-dunkierki>. Accessed: May 12, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> E. Paul Zehr elaborates on that in the book *Becoming Batman*, (15).

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Iron Man, Cyborg, or Nebula whose augmentations remain an integral part of their bodies. More on that subject can be found in Calvert Bronwen. *Being Bionic. The World of TV Cyborgs*.

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"Avengers: Endgame" przebil "Titanica" w 11 dni. Film bije kolejne rekordy

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