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# Periodization of the American Comic Book — A New Proposal<sup>1</sup>

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The article aims to present a new proposal for the periodization of the history of American comic book. The introduction deals with the problems of other propositions: the academic one created by Arthur Asa Berger and the so-called *Olympic / Mainstream* that is mainly used by industry artists and readers. The most critical shortcomings of these periodization are also listed, including them being outdated. The new proposal complements the deficiencies of the previous two: in its actuality, it focuses on the transformations of the comics caused by the socio-political implications of the events of September 11, 2001. Each epoch was given specific time frames, cut-off dates, events, and characteristics.

**Key words:** comics, comic book, history, periodization, USA, America, DC, Marvel, Image, film, movie, 9/11

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a follow-up expansion and an update of thoughts and threads from the previous article “Comic Books as the Modern American Mythology” published in *Ad Americam* 2014/15. It is also based on two conference presentations: “Periodization of the American comics” from the conference “Comic Con 2014: comics as a symbol of American popular culture” and “The end of the Modern Age of Comic Books? On the periodization of the latest history of American comics” at the conference “Comic Con 2015: comics as an integral part of pop culture”, which were organized by American Studies Science Club at the Institute of American Studies and Polish Diaspora of the Jagiellonian University. The extended and expanded version of this article is also included as part of the chapter “Comics in America, America in comics” from the unpublished upcoming Ph.D. dissertation called “Terroryzm, polityka i swobody obywatelskie w amerykańskim komiksie po 11 września 2001 roku na podstawie analizy komiksów wydawnictw Marvel Comics, DC Comics oraz Image Comics” (“Terrorism, politics, and civil liberties in the American comics after September 11, 2001, based on a comics analysis of Marvel Comics, DC Comics, and Image Comics”). The public defense of the thesis and the conferment of the academic degree took place on January 26, 2021.

*In every era, the phenomenon today called the comics has found its expressive forms and those best associated with the cultural life. (...) Nevertheless, to be completely perfect, comics lacked one quality, maybe only one word that would make them what they are today. They lacked America. (Banach 164-173).*

## Introduction

### Periodization of the American comics: revision

In comics studies, as in any academic sub-discipline, many different approaches to the periodization of its history have emerged. One of the first<sup>2</sup>, which was created within the academic community, was Arthur Asa Berger's work titled *The Comic-Stripped American: What Dick Tracy, Blondie, Daddy Warbucks, and Charlie Brown Tell Us about Ourselves*. It was released in 1973 and contains an analysis of the most popular comics in terms of references to American society and its problems. Berger divided the history of American comics into three generations. He considered the changes in the images of comics characters to be the primary determinant of this division and linked them to the transformations taking place in American society (Berger 5-22).<sup>3</sup>

In the comics industry, the most popular model of periodization is the one that can be called *Olympic* or *Mainstream*<sup>4</sup>. It is used by readers, artists, and representatives of American publishing houses. Its epochs and cut-off dates mainly refer to the superhero comics and the activities of major publishers such as DC Comics and Marvel Comics.<sup>5</sup>

Both of these proposals accurately describe the history of comics and highlight the most important events. However, it should be emphasized that Berger's proposition is noticeably lacking the precisely defined cut-off dates, and thus also clearly outlined epochs. In the disquisition, he does not provide significant events that could mark the beginning or end of the described periods. Similar deficiencies are also noticeable in the *Olympic / Mainstream* proposal, in the case of *Brown Age* and *Modern Age*. Also, when Berger refers to many comics genres, the mainstream periodization practically concerns only the most popular series from the superhero genre.

However, the biggest complaint against both, is them being outdated. Berger's proposal has never been updated since the book was published in 1972. The *Modern*

<sup>2</sup> It is also worth mentioning the authors who did not come from academia, but whose work focused on the history of comics like Coulton Waugh, *The Comics* (1947) or Jules Feiffer, *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (1965).

<sup>3</sup> A summary of Berger's proposal is in the table at the end of the article.

<sup>4</sup> There is no commonly used phraseology for this periodization, so for the purposes of this article, words such as "Mainstream" or "Olympic" will be used. Also, Michael E. Uslan writes about similar associations with sports medals, in his letter to the editors of the magazine *Alter Ego* 2005/3, pp. 79.

<sup>5</sup> A summary of the *Olympic/Mainstream* proposal is in the table at the end of the article.

*Age of the Olympic / Mainstream* proposal begins in 1985 and has been going on ever since, ignoring the changes and shifts in the medium that have taken place in the last 35 years.

In recent years, there have been attempts to update the historical chronicles of the comics, in which the work of Paul Levitz is worth mentioning. In his *75 Years of DC Comics: The Art of Modern Mythmaking*, while describing the history of his employer and one of the largest comic book publishers, Levitz divided the period from 1984 to the present day into three separate eras — *The Dark Age* (1984-1998), *The Modern Age* (1998-2010) and *The Digital Age* (2010 — till now). However, while Levitz's observations and analyzes are accurate, they are burdened with the error of narrowing them down only to one publisher, and therefore cannot be directly universalized across the medium. Additionally, Levitz's proposal duplicates the omissions of the *Olympic / Mainstream* proposal, by not mentioning explicit events heralding a transgression, and the last period was only suggested in a brief afterword.

## The methodology and the purpose of the article

It is, therefore, necessary to propose a new periodization of the history of American comic book, which is the purpose of this article. This will be achieved through the periodization technique, which is one of the primary tools of the historical methods (Topolski 133-136). It consists of dividing the past into clearly defined time intervals. One of the goals of this procedure is to present and highlight the historical processes of change and evolution that result from specific factors and events. In this way, the main topic of this article is naturally based within the historiography of the comic books, which is rooted in both media studies and cultural studies.

The new periodization proposal will include a division into six separate epochs, starting with the zero period. They will be described and characterized in chronological order in the following sections of this article. Each defined era will be given a distinguishing name and specific dates that result from significant boundary occurrences. Each of these events will be thoroughly delineated and elucidated in the course of the descriptive narrative with the partial use of the historical analysis method and cursory content analysis for selected titles. This scheme will allow observation of the influence of historical, political, economic, social, and cultural events on comics. Cultural and historical connections between and beyond the individual texts will also be observed and highlighted, as well as the impact of changes and evolution on comic book artists and thus on the entire medium.

The new proposition will especially take into account objections and reservations raised towards the previously mentioned proposals by Berger and the *Olympic / Mainstream*. Consequently, it will be updated to the current events and state of knowledge. Although the article focuses on the most popular comics about superheroes, other genres will not be omitted. What is most important, the new proposal will take into account the changes that have taken place in the market and in America itself in recent years.

## 1. The Zero Age *The Time of proto-comics (-1895/'96)*

### Prehistory of comics

The origin of art, especially the beginnings of painting, dates to the pre-historic drawings, for instance, those discovered in the Lascaux cave<sup>6</sup>. A more broad-based approach dictates finding a definite beginning of the described phenomenon, to be able to show its evolution through the analysis of changes over the ages. Society, and all aspects of its functioning, is a complex system of interconnected vessels, where each element affects the multiple numbers of the next ones and where the slightest change can lead to a series of revolutionary transformations. One of the dilemmas of scientists is to pinpoint the moment in history from which the historiography of a given phenomenon should start.

While describing the history of comics<sup>7</sup>, Polish art critic Andrzej Banach mentions three genres, assigning a specific era to each: "1) completely without text, 2) with dialogue text embedded in the picture itself, 3) with a description placed below." (Banach 157-159). The first of these genres is the oldest form of illustration that tries to convey content and meaning without words. For such a picture to be understood, it must be based on a commonly known topic and be expressed in transparent plasticity. Religious iconography depicting the Stations of the Cross can be considered such works. The second of the genres mentioned by Banach refers to the comics in its present form. The third type concerns engravings, especially those from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, which depicted Biblical scenes or the lives of saints.

However, two other Polish comic book researchers, Jerzy Szyłak (4-6) and Krzysztof T. Toeplitz (16-26) undertook a polemic on this approach. In their opinion, such origins can only be found in the form of cartoon political satire, at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in France or England.

Hence, the *Zero Age*, which can be called the *time of proto-comics (-1895/'96)* is the period that precedes the appearance of comics in their modern form. At that time, in all forms of art that combined images and words, we can find elements, motifs, and means of expression characteristic of today's comic books. As Toeplitz and Szyłak propose, the proto-comics should be sought among creations of painters of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, whose talent, pioneering work, and creativeness edged near the comics form further, such as Rudolf Töpffer, Gustave Doré, and Wilhelm Busch. Following M. Thomas Inge, it is also worth associating the British painter William Hogarth to these names (Inge, "Origins of..." 11).

Since this artist was born almost a century earlier than the others, he should in fact be mentioned first. William Hogarth, who, from 1732, began publishing a series of moralizing and satirical series of engravings, like *A Harlot's Progress* (1732) or *A Rake's Progress* (1735) and more. Another artist was Rudolf Töpffer, the creator

<sup>6</sup> The Lascaux Cave, discovered in 1940 and located in Aquitaine in southwestern France, is the first discovered cave complex that contains prehistoric rock drawings.

<sup>7</sup> In his argument, Banach treats comics as a kind of illustration.

of the album *Monsieur Sabot* (1833), a work full of ironic stories about society along with illustrations with didactic signatures. The third notable artist from this age was Gustave Doré, author of *Histoire Pittoresque, dramatique et caricaturale de la sainte Russie* (1854), which is a satirical chronicle consisting of graphics and descriptions. Wilhelm Busch was one the last of the great precursors of the comics. His *Max und Moritz* (1865) is a book that consists of illustrations with rhyming descriptions and is about two unbearable kids who regularly play malicious tricks on adults.

## The birth of the American comics

Banach emphasizes that the real birth of comics took place in the United States of America (164-173). For the Americans, the universal message of images became much more critical, and, above all, more practical than English words. USA is a country of immigrants, and its unusual economic growth since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was based mostly on the cheap workforce of the immigrants. These were poorly educated people who did not know any language except their native ones. All they were asked for was hard and diligent physical work. Many of the immigrants never learned the English language, and the acculturation happened only in the next generation. However, the desire to interact with culture, even in its purest form, was nevertheless common. Partly it was fulfilled within the circles of their ethnic groups, but the Anglo-Saxon intelligence also wanted to participate through the use of pictures and graphics in the mass communication process. Such magazines as *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* or *Harper's Weekly* used illustrations instead of reports to reach bigger audiences who did not know the English language. That was how they related the Civil War or the succeeding stages of the Wild West conquest (Toeplitz 26).

The birth of the comics is inextricably bound with the "yellow press", and the war for the reader waged between press magnates – Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. One of the tactics to convince people to buy newspapers were humorous stories consisting of several drawings. In 1894, Pulitzer hired Richard Felton Outcault as a cartoonist in *New York World*. In July of the following year, *Hogan's Alley* began to appear – a black-and-white series of drawings about life and problems of the lower classes living in agglomerations. One of the many recurring characters was a bald boy dressed in a vast, sack-like nightgown. On February 16, 1896, for the first time, his shirt was painted yellow and so he was named the Yellow Kid. This date is considered by many to be the symbolic birth of the comics (Watson and Hill 45; Anderson 145). However, Richard D. Olson postulates the need to consider the change of this symbolic birth. According to his findings, the Yellow Kid's first appearance, but in black and white format, was a year earlier on February 17, 1895, in a piece called *Fourth Ward Brownie* from the *New York World* (Olson 27-28).<sup>8</sup> Also, Robert C. Harvey confirms the December date as the character's debut (38). Recognition of this would place the birth of the comics before the symbolic birth of the cinema on December 28, 1895, when the brothers Lumiere had the world's first commercial movie screening at the Grand Cafe in Paris.

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<sup>8</sup> It can go even further, as it was only a reprint of the drawing that was originally published in the *Truth* magazine on February 9, 1895.

## 2. First Age

### ***The Gold Age of Newspaper Comic Strips (1895/96-1929)***

The first period begins with the symbolic birth of the comics in the USA and the press comics in that period, as Berger described, fully reflected the state of the American society. The heroes were like children who love pure situational humor, and at the same time, are prone to violence and cruelty. Like society, they were unsure of their fate or future and felt overwhelmed by life in large cities. For example, Berger interprets *The Yellow Kid* comic strip as a reflection of the harsh conditions of poor metropolitan residents, especially immigrants. Moreover, he decodes the characters from *Mutt and Jeff* as the reflection of the process of questioning American individualism or the myth of the self-made man. The heroes of the comics, although strong-willed, are unable to achieve success. They meet with failure at every turn, yet they never lose hope (Berger 23-77).

Immigrants, therefore, as well as other social groups, could read about their everyday existential problems in comic strips, and its characters and motives were identical to their own. These pictorial stories fueled the sale of newspapers, and in time the artists were given more space to present their works.

During this period, the most characteristic elements of the comics appeared and solidified like frames or statements of the characters placed in speech balloons. As the most influential comics of this period should be mentioned: *The Katzenjammer Kids* by Rudolph Dirks, *Little Nemo in Slumberland* by Winsor McCay, *Mutt and Jeff* by Bud Fisher or *Krazy Kat* by George Herriman.

## 3. The Second Age

### ***The Time of Adventurers, Superheroes, and their Comics Magazines (1929-1961)***

#### **Adventurers from the comic strips**

There was a significant change in the history of the comics in the 1930s. Both the new story genre and the new publishing format appeared on the market. It began on January 7, 1929, when on the same day, two comic strips appeared, both plots filled with action scenes and depicting a new type of adventurer-hero. The first of them was an adaptation of the bestseller novel by Edgar Rice Burroughs *Tarzan of the Apes*, which was created by Hal Foster. The author used many narrative solutions borrowed from film art: shots from a frog or a bird's eye view, close-ups, or placing a light source in the background behind the characters (Gabilliet 56-57).

The second title was *Buck Rogers*, created by Philip Nowlan and Dick Calkins. The comics presented a full set of the most characteristic features of the science fiction genre: space rockets, time and intergalactic travels, laser weapons, robots, and aliens (Edwards 551). Berger interprets it as an optimistic response to the times of crisis with the hero, full of courage and will to fight, proving that all adversities could be overcome.



It is also worth mentioning some later titles such as crime-noir *Dick Tracy* (1931) by Chester Gould or space opera *Flash Gordon* (1934) by Alex Raymond. The second was considered by Berger as a manifestation of the American idea of democracy in its superior form of organization of the state. The main hero – an American – fought against the galactic tyrant and brought freedom and happiness to alien races inhabiting other planets (Berger 93-101).

## The birth of the comics magazines

The April of 1929 is also the month of the premiere of *Funnies*, which is the first magazine offering original works and not reprints of newspaper comic strips. Although it did not gain popularity, it heralded the arrival of a new format that would soon dominate the market (Gabilliet 57). What is more, in 1933, *Funnies on Parade* appeared, a promotional title released by Proctor & Gamble, and created by Max C. Gaines and Harry I. Wildenberg. Dazzled by the success of the magazine and its subsequent parts, the authors decided to create a regularly published title, *Famous Funnies*, which began to appear in May 1934 and was published for 20 consecutive years (Duncan and Smith 28-30).

## Emergence of Superheroes

The next publishing breakthrough of this period was, of course, the debut of Superman in the first issue of *Action Comics* onwards from April 18, 1938. The popularity of the work of Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel was overwhelming. Series with this superhero were soon selling millions of copies each month, making the publishing of such stories a lucrative business (Daniels 22). The publishers that later merged into DC Comics<sup>9</sup> had started selling issues with the debuts of subsequent heroes like Batman in #27 *Detective Comics* from 1939, first Flash/Jay Garrick in *Flash Comics* #1 from 1940, or Wonder Woman in *All Star Comics* #8 from 1941. The first team of superheroes, i.e., Justice Society of America, debuted in *All Star Comics* # 3 with the cover date of 1940/1941.

During this period, the future competitor Marvel Comics was called Timely Comics Inc., and was owned by Martin Goodman, who founded it in 1939. On August 31 that year, a dozen or so hours before the German invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II, *Marvel Comics* #1 was published in the USA. The issue sold a staggering number of over 800 thousand copies and contained many different fantastic stories. However, the two most important are those featuring the first superheroes of the Marvel universe, which are the Human Torch (created by Carl Burgos) and Namor the Submariner (created by Bill Everett). It is worth emphasizing that while Batman and Superman lived in fictitious cities, the Human Torch flew around the Empire State Building, and his fight with Namor took place at the Statue of Liberty.

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<sup>9</sup> National Periodical Publications was founded in 1934 by merging National Allied Publications, Detective Comics Inc., and All-American Publications. In 1977, the name was changed to DC Comics Inc., although it unofficially existed before.

Comics creators soon went a step further in imitating the real world in their work and harnessed their heroes to fight the Nazis. At this point, one of the most famous superheroes, Captain America, created by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, joined this confrontation. On December 20, 1940, *Captain America #1* was released, with a cover illustration depicting Captain America knocking out Hitler himself. Thus, superheroes from the world of Marvel enlisted to fight the Nazis long before America itself joined the war (Howe 24-27).

## Post-war changes in the market

The market was soon crowded with superheroes and these magazines sold monthly copies in the vicinity of 25 million, of which a large part was sent to soldiers stationed outside the US (Howe 36). However, with the end of the armed conflict in Europe, the popularity of this type of story drastically decreased. In the year 1949, Captain America appeared for the last time, the series changed its name to *Captain America's Weird Tales*, and soon became an anthology of horror stories.

This change was symptomatic and showed a post-war shift in trends of the comics market, where horror and war comics became popular. These genres reflected social moods, where the growing fear of another great conflict dominated, this time with the Communists. One of the first such popular series was *Blackhawk* by Chuck Cuider and Bob Powell with the participation of Will Eisner. It was published by Quality Comics from 1944 until its bankruptcy in 1956 when DC Comics bought the rights. The comics presented a group of hunting aces from various countries who, under the leadership of a Pole<sup>10</sup> named Blackhawk, fought the Nazis.

A publishing house, which had a rich collection of war titles, was Charlton Comics, founded in 1946 and operating in the market until 1985. Among their military series can be found such titles as *U.S. Fighting Air Force* (1952-56), *Fightin' Air Force* (1956-66), *Fightin' Navy* (1956-66), *Fightin' Marines* (1955-84), *Fightin' Army* (1956-84), *Battlefield Action* (1958-84) and many more.

One of the unique titles of this period was *Frontline Combat* (1951-54) from Entertaining Comics (EC), which presented anti-war stories that drastically showed the nightmare of war. This company did quite well during the period because in addition to war comics they had in their resources numerous magazines dedicated to stories from the genre of crime, science-fiction, and horror, including such titles as *The Crypt of Terror/Tales from the Crypt* (1950-1955), *The Vault of Horror* (1950-1955), or *Crime Suspense Stories* (1950-1955). All these series ceased to appear at the same time because of events that rocked the entire comics industry:

Nineteen Fifty-four was a frantic year of Communist witch hunts and blacklists, of frenzied name-calling and paranoia. While the US attempted to curb Communist expansion abroad, the nation entered a period of self-purgation as Congressional committees sought to ferret out Communist infiltration in the government, labor unions, and the motion picture industry. Senator Joseph McCarthy led the charge against alleged traitors in the State Department, while Senator Estes Kefauver investigated what some considered

<sup>10</sup> In later adventures, he is depicted as an American of Polish descent.



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the worse form of subversion—the seduction of the innocent minds by the comic book industry. (Inge, *Comics as Culture* 117)

## The Comics Code

In 1954, Dr. Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* was published, which contained research in the field of psychology and was extremely critical of comic books. In the same year, due to the infamous cover of *Crime Suspense Stories* # 22, which depicted a murderer holding a severed head of a woman and a bloody ax, William Gaines, the owner of EC, was subpoenaed before the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. After that, the publishers affiliated with the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers (ACMP) were afraid of the possibility of introducing restrictions by legislators, and above all, further losses of readers. To prevent it, they decided to introduce a self-censorship system called the Comics Code (CC) supervised by the Comics Code Authority (CCA) (Nyberg, 58-68).

The comics which complied with the rules were given a unique mark informing about the safe contents of the publication. CC forbade imaging monsters (such as vampires or werewolves), triumphing criminals or corrupt police officers. Nudity, vulgarity, excessive violence, and even minority protagonists were forbidden. It was not allowed to show social pathology, sexual deviations, or behaviors, which undermined the image of an American family (Szyłak 46-49).

Wertham's publication, United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency activity, and the introduction of CC effectively eliminated the presence of many comics titles, including practically purging the horror genre off the market (Wright 175-179).

## Comics for and about children

During this period, the continued popularity of comics aimed at younger audiences should also be highlighted. It is worth mentioning such titles as *Little Lulu* by Marjorie Henderson Buell, comics devoted to the adventures of Archie created in 1941 by John Goldwater, which still appears today, and above all, titles with characters created by Walt Disney, where the first comic strip appeared in 1930, and the collected edition *Mickey Mouse Magazine* was published by Dell in 1935.

Some comics presented the adventures of animal heroes or children but were aimed at an adult audience. *Pogo* by Walt Kelly almost directly mimicked and commented on America's political reality. During the anti-communist activities of Senator McCarthy's commission, the comics introduced the character of Mole MacCarone, who led a crusade against all the birds. Furthermore, caricatures of vice-president Spiro Agnew were sought in the form of the hyena dressed in elements of a military uniform and displaying authoritarian character traits. Charles Shulz's *Peanuts* is considered to be a commentary about the condition of modern society and the place of the human in it. The last one to be mentioned is *Little Orphan Annie* by Harold Gray, which Berger considers to question the faith that the lower classes had in the American dream and democracy and its benefits (79-92, 172-198).

## The Hollywood First Wave and the return of the superheroes

Another critical thing to remember is Hollywood's interest in comics in the 1930s and 1940s, which makes up the First Wave of film adaptations. It consisted, among others, of such titles as animated *Superman* (1941); serial films like *Batman* (1943), *Captain America* (1944), *Superman* (1948), *Batman and Robin* (1949); those based on newspapers comic strips like *Flash Gordon* (1936) and its sequels; *Little Orphan Annie* (1932 and another in 1938); *Dick Tracy* (1937) and a couple of its sequels; *Blondie* (1938) along with 27 other sequels or *Li'l Abner* (1940 and the musical version from 1959).

Moreover, in October 1956, National Allied Publications again tried their hand at superhero comics by publishing *Showcase*, which aimed to present new characters and test the interest of readers. In the fourth issue, Flash appeared again, the hero known from the previous comics. Although the extraordinary power of fast movement remained, many elements of this character had changed: appearance, identity, or the genesis of his superpowers. The cover, on which Flash runs through celluloid tape, also pointed out that comics artists not only want to compete with other publishers, but also with the cinematography itself. The new version of Flash gained the approval of readers, and soon more superheroes from the past has returned in altered versions. Consecutively, 1960 saw the debut of *Justice League of America*, which presented the joint adventures of the most popular superheroes. It gained colossal fan recognition and was one of DC's best-selling titles (Levitz 249-255).

The debut of the new version of Flash marked the beginning of the *Silver Age* in the *Olympic/Mainstream* periodization. Although it is a significant event, it cannot be called revolutionary. It was a return to proven features and concepts, with a more modern graphic design. It is only with the debut of new superheroes from Marvel Comics that we can notice a significant change in the form and content of comics stories that allows us to pinpoint the beginning of a new period in history.

### 4. The Third Age *The Marvel Revolution and the Period of the Underground Comix (1961–1978)*

#### Marvelous Revolution

At the time, the publisher of Atlas Comics, the successor of Timely Comics, was struggling with financial problems. The company was in distress, and the owner planned to resign from publishing comics titles. Stan Lee, who worked there as an editor, and at the same time was Goodman's nephew, was given the task of creating new comic. He was to model the competition and create a team of superheroes. In November 1961, *Fantastic Four* created by the duo Stan Lee and Jack Kirby debuted.

Various elements made this series different, especially from their predecessors. First of all, the adventures were located in New York instead of a fictional city. It allowed public figures to appear in the storyline, and real historical events influenced

the characters, as was the case with the war adventures of Captain America. The genesis of their superpowers was related to the armaments race and the beginning of the space programs. A few months earlier, soviet astronaut Yuri Gagarin took the first flight into space. The fact that the Communists were able to send a crew into space and safely get them back caused almost a panic attack in USA.

Another compelling feature was the double identity of the characters. The Fantastic Four members were the first ones to reveal their real names, which made them idols among the citizens of New York. Nevertheless, another feature of this particular comic was the characters' problems with their superpowers. Ben Grimm, aka The Thing, has his dilemmas because he used to be a fit and handsome man before the incident, and now his skin lies under a thick layer of rock, which gives him incredible strength, but at the cost of deforming his body. Depression, connected with a short fuse, causes many arguments within the team. The theme of extraordinary abilities being a source of mental health problems had not been explored in superhero comics before.

Also, the heroes had to struggle with personal issues and misfortunes, which brought them closer to ordinary people, and away from pristine godlike heroes of the DC Universe. This new approach to creating each character was another innovation. Each of the heroes was shown to be grappling with at least a few issues. They had to deal with them on a daily basis besides saving the world. As a comics screenwriter, David Anthony Kraft notes, in DC all the characters behaved and spoke in the same way, to the point that their words could have been swapped within speech balloons without any consequences or differences (Tucker 30)<sup>11</sup>. As Reed Tucker argues:

Marvel's new approach to storytelling changed not only the comic book business, but also the way superheroes were handled in general—an approach that still provides the template today (...). The modern-day Marvel that arrived in 1961 quickly shook up the comics industry in a way that mirrored the dramatic cultural and political upheavals the entire country was experiencing. (10).

Marvel's revolution started in 1961 focused on realism, bringing the heroes closer to their readers by highlighting their flaws and failures, showing their struggles with everyday hardships, and placing them in the current socio-political context. A similar conclusion is also made by Anthony R. Mills, who juxtaposes the turn towards realism in American anthropology with the revolution in the genre of superhero comics started by the #1 *Fantastic Four* (96-135).

## The World of Marvel's Superheroes

Faced with great success, Stan Lee, Kirby, and other artists decided to create more superheroes in a similar trend and expand the list of comics titles. In May 1962, Hulk made his debut, and the comics referred to the fear of the atomic bomb and the effects of radiation. In August 1962, Spider-Man appeared, a superhero who was

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<sup>11</sup> The page numbers provided for Reed Tucker's book "Slugfest: Inside the Epic, 50-year Battle between Marvel and DC" are from the e-book version and they are not the same as the pages in the paperback edition.

a teenager. Peter Parker, like thousands of American high schoolers, had love dilemmas and had suffered psychological and physical violence at the hands of his peers. However, as a superhero at night, he was fighting against crime in New York. Also, in March 1963, the figure of Iron Man debuted, and his origins were firmly related to the Vietnam war.

Not to mention that in September of the same year, the X-Men group appeared, which had to face both racism and their radical counterparts who wanted to fight for equal rights by force. It is worth highlighting that in the year when the mutants were born, the March on Washington took place, where Martin Luther King gave his *I have a dream* speech. Many a time the figure of Professor Xavier and his methods of fighting for equality were compared to the pastor's activities, while the aggressive attitude of his opponent Magneto was compared to Malcolm X's approach (Chaney 14-15).

Furthermore, in 1966, the first African superhero appeared in #52 *Fantastic Four* – T'Challa, called Black Panther, who was the king of the fictional state of Wakanda in Africa. The first Afro-American superhero Sam Wilson, called Falcon, debuted in 1969 in #117 *Captain America*.

All these heroes operate in a shared world and most of them live in New York. Each of the Marvel comics heroes reflected the dilemmas common Americans faced in their daily lives. Stories and themes often referred to the political situation, social problems, or international conflict. Comic books have become an artistic commentary on the surrounding reality, and with grim changes taking place in the world, similar processes occurred in the world of heroes. As Tucker sums up:

Lee and his collaborators, (...), managed to introduce a different kind of hero at a time when America was entering into a period of historic social upheaval. Who wants to read about a gee-whiz cop hero when you can see the real police every night on the news beating African Americans in the streets? (17).

## DC in the face of change

In 1963, Marvel Comics sold 22.5 million copies; and two years later 40.5 million, where each of the titles had a circulation of about 175,000 (Howe 110). The leadership position of DC Comics began to be threatened, and its owners finally began to notice the revolution that was taking place. During this time, many changes were introduced to bring their comics closer to the works of the competition: joint adventures of superheroes, highlighting a shared universe, narrative changes, or attempts to refer to events of the time. This shift was also conjugated with the generational change at DC Comics. New artists had appeared, who started to modernize the comics. It is worth mentioning the duo Dennis O'Neil or Neal Adams, who from 1970 started their series *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*. It presented various social problems by simply showcasing their superheroes on a journey across the USA. The first issue with a April cover date (*Green Lantern Vol. 2 #76*) raised the issue of racism and the inactivity and powerlessness of superheroes in the face of oppression. However, all such changes were made too late to reverse the sales trend. In 1972, Marvel Comics surpassed its older competitor and gained market leadership (Tucker 36).

## Comix from the Underground

The 1960s in comics periodization are also called the years of the *Comics (or Comix) Underground*. The artists who would not want to conform to the CC began to publish in underground companies and the independent press of the 1960s. Gazettes such as New York's *East Village Other* or *Los Angeles Free Press* published the first of the kind. In time, similar to what took place with the first comics, they started publishing them in separate magazines. One of the most popular ones was *Zap Comics*, which initially consisted only of works of Robert Crumb (the creator of *Fritz the Cat*), but soon other artists such as S. Clay Wilson, Robert Williams, and Rick Griffin appeared on the pages.

It is also worth mentioning other titles like the magazine *Bijou Funnies* under the supervision of the cartoonist Jay Lynch, where Art Spiegelman has published his works. Gilbert Shelton's *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* was a story about two drug addicts, a critique of the establishment, as well as a satire on counter-culture. *Wonder Wart-Hog* was a parody of the superhero genre. *Wimmen's Comix* focused on feminist issues and erotic or homosexual themes. Some of the underground comics showed ordinary people from the lower classes struggling with the everyday reality. Problematic phenomena such as crime, drug addiction, unemployment, or corruption were often depicted. For the first time, homosexuality became a subject. On the other hand, some of the creators attracted readers by creating stories containing hard pornography, sadism, and macabre. The popularity of these comics began to decline in the first decade of the 1970s. It was due to the liberalization of self-censorship (Rosenkranz).

## The fall of auto-censorship

The beginning of the decline of the CC and the departure from its principles happened in the summer of 1971 primarily due to the decision made by Marvel Comics. Issues #96-98 *The Amazing Spider-Man* depicted a story about the problems of drug abuse and was created at the request of the U S Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. However, due to the drug theme prohibited by the CC, the comics were not authorized by the CCA. Despite that, Stan Lee decided to publish the issues without the CC seal on the cover, which was the first step towards the abolition of the auto-censorship regime. Soon President Nixon<sup>12</sup> wrote a letter of appreciation to Stan Lee, along with a request to coordinate further comic book undertakings aimed at drug prevention (Raphael and Spurgeon 129-130).

Marvel's rival DC followed the lead by publishing its first story containing drug abuse problems a few months later. The October issue of the *Green Lantern/Green Arrow (Green Lantern Vol 2 #85 with the August cover date)* focused on Roy "Speedy" Harper, Green Arrow's sidekick, turning out to be a heroin addict. The controversial cover presented the hero a moment after the injection of the drug

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<sup>12</sup> The letter on behalf of the President was sent by the President's Special Action Office of Drug Abuse Prevention.

into his arm, with a syringe, a metal spoon, and other characteristic tools lying on the table (Tucker 38).

The fact that the last-mentioned comics issue was published with the CC seal was a sign that the system had become more liberal. As CC was weakened, new horror-style comics started showing up again. Superheroes representing ethnic minorities also began to be created. There were more appearances of female figures who, although strong and independent, were also often scantily dressed or drawn in provocative poses, which was not possible at the time of self-censorship. Comics writers began to refer to the social problems plaguing America at the time. In addition to drug addiction, references were made to alcoholism, crime, social inequality, or conflicts on the international stage. Death and suffering ceased to be taboo subjects, and soon the readers were shaken by the story *The Night Gwen Stacy Died*. The 1973 issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man* depicted the death of the innocent girl – the hero's girlfriend – killed by his enemy.

## Changes after liberalization

The fall of the CC system, initiated by Marvel's story of drug addiction and then continued by DC comics, was a significant event – in the *Olympic / Mainstream* periodization, it begins the *Bronze Age*. It allowed the creators the creative freedom and a possibility of making broader references to difficult topics that were afflicting society. Although it was a historical change, it did not immediately lead to fundamental transformations, but only deepened the process that began in November 1961.

With the liberalization of puritan principles in the 1970s, narrative elements and genres that, for several years, could not appear in mainstream comics had returned. Both Marvel and DC began to create horror comics like *Tomb of Dracula* or *Swamp Thing*. New heroes that belonged to ethnic minorities began to be created, like the Afro-American Luke Cage, whose image was strongly inspired by the influence of the Blaxploitation films, or Storm, who was the first African-American superhero and the first female leader of a mixed-gender team. Also, the Asian character Shang-Chi, whose adventures in the *Master of Kung Fu*, were a response to the fascination of the American society with karate movies. Erotic threads also began to appear in comics, and superheroes started to date, form relationships, and wake up in the morning in bed with a partner. The changes also applied to the conservative DC Comics, where in 1976, the liberal 28-year-old Jenette Kahn became the publisher.

## 5. The Fourth Age *The Time of Triumph and Death (1978-2001)*

### Graphic Novels

The beginning of this period is associated with the recognition and appreciation of comics as an art form and is marked by the premiere of *A Contract with God*, by the outstanding comics artist Will Eisner. The comic book inspired by the artist's life is



a story about a poor Jew living in one of the tenement houses in New York. To convince the publisher of his idea and to be taken seriously, Eisner used the term *graphic novel* to describe his work (Chris-Sims). The comic book was published in a collective format, was intended for an adult reader, and was sold in bookstores. As emphasized by Paul Williams and James Lyons, this was not the first comics published in book format (they mention for example the works of Töpffer), and it was not the first time the term *graphic novel* was used – historically, it appeared in an Amateur Press Association brochure from 1964 (Williams and Lyons XIV). However, it is Eisner's work that is considered the first graphic novel and the symbolic moment when the comics stopped being a medium capable of telling only simple stories for children.

The position of the comics as an art form was also strengthened thanks to the work of Art Spiegelman. His *Maus* began appearing in episodes in 1980, and in 1992, it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. It was the first prestigious and significant award in the history of the medium. The works of Eisner and Spiegelman proved that comic books could address urgent and complex topics that were previously reserved for literature or cinema.

## Hollywood's Second Wave

It should also be mentioned that 1978 is the year when *Superman*, directed by Richard Donner, premiered in movie theatres. With Christopher Reeve in the lead role and such stars in supporting roles as Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman, the film was highly appreciated, both by viewers and critics. Its premiere began the Second Wave of film adaptations that lasted until the mid-90s, where titles such as *Batman* (1989) directed by Tim Burton or the CBS series *The Incredible Hulk* (1977-1982) and its film sequels are worth mentioning.

## The British Invasion in the Dark Age

The 1980s are undoubtedly the time when comics triumphed, being included into a wide spectrum of art forms and an element of high culture. But it is also called the *Dark Age* because many comics started to touch upon more serious and darker topics referring to the social and political problems of the US (Voger). The premieres of two comics – *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) by Frank Miller and *Watchmen* (1986-1987) by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons – are worth mentioning. The first of them presented a pessimistic vision of the future, where Batman was forced to return from retirement due to the enormity of the issue with crime. In the background of the story, the global Cold War conflict was at its height, which ended with the detonation of the Russian nuclear warhead on American soil.

Furthermore, *Watchmen* presents an alternative American history where, thanks to the presence of super-people, the Vietnam War was a spectacular success, and President Nixon held office of president for the fifth time in a row. Using the scheme of superhero stories, the authors created a grim vision of anti-heroes working for the government, a story about the fall of American ideas, full of historical references, and soaked with the spirit of Reagan. The public and the critics were amazed by the

comic book and distinguished it on the list of 100 most important literary works of the *Time* magazine.

Other outstanding titles in addition to *The Batman Returns* and *Watchmen* are *Swamp Thing* by Alan Moore, Garth Ennis' *Hellblazer*, Grant Morrison's *Animal Man*, and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*. All these European artists created and worked for DC Comics, and their appearance in the American comic book industry is called "The British Invasion" (Mazur and Danner 175).

## Comics Crossover Events

Another characterization of this period is the start of a trend for crossover events, where the characters from various comics took part in one big adventure. The goal of those comic books was to enhance interest among fans and to enlarge sales. Marvel Comics in 1984 started the mini-series *Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars*, the primary purpose of which was to promote a new line of toys from the Mattel company (Howe 313-316).

Moreover, DC Comics, on the occasion of its 50th anniversary in 1985, started the mini-series *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. It resonated with the industry, readers, and it is considered one of the essential crossovers in the history of comics. This event injected new life into the entire DC universe (Daniels 188-189).

During this period, Marvel Comics, while remaining a sales leader, also showed triumphs thanks to titles such as Miller's *Daredevil* or *Uncanny X-Men* by Chris Claremont with the participation of John Byrne. In the late 1980s, Jim Lee began to illustrate the latter series. His style quickly became a favorite among readers. The first issue of the new *X-Men* series created by the Claremont-Lee duo broke all sales records in 1991, distributing eight million copies, which set the Guinness World Record (Elliott and Watkins 106).

## New Image of the Comic Book Market

Another significant change during this period was the transformation of the comics distribution market itself. Over the past decades, publishers had handed over their products to wholesalers, who distributed them to press outlets. Direct sales and the appearance of specialized shops that offered only comic books turned out to be the new game plan. In 1980, there were already 3,000 such specialized comics sales points in the country. Comics stores had become a gathering point for fans who could buy all their favorite issues, get acquainted with new products, or buy numerous gadgets with their beloved superheroes (Tucker 58-59). As aptly summarized by Terrence R. Wandtke:

Nevertheless, the way that the industry understood itself changed in the 1980s due to the creator's rights movement, direct distribution, the improvement in print technology, and most importantly, the shift in the consumer market . (162).

The creator's rights movement was mainly about artist's demands to increase the salary and ensure the payment of royalty from the sale of comics and gadgets. Its

most significant effect was the establishment of a new publishing company called Image Comics in 1992 owned by such famous artists as Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee, Rob Liefeld, Marc Silvestri, Erik Larsen, and Jim Valentino. Their new series like *Spawn* and *Savage Dragon* met with great interest from readers, which allowed the new entity to limit the duopoly of Marvel Comics and DC Comics.

It appeared that the era of triumph would last forever or at least for many years. However, as always, greed proved to be the greatest enemy of art. The comics branch had always been a business in which income was more important than artistic values, and CC was a good example of that. High sales caused by the works of Miller, Moore, and others fueled the publisher's expectations. Additionally, through the years, the practice of collecting comics, speculating and buying issues and selling them at higher prices also developed. The publishing companies started to release special issues that were supposed to remain sealed and, therefore, maintain higher value. Editions with different covers were also released so that a collector would have to buy all of them to have a full set. These practices artificially inflated sales and concealed a real decline in interest. With less regard for fans or the artists and their rights, it is easy to imagine that sale was more important than the satisfaction of the critics and the readers.

## Crisis of the 1990s

In the 1990s, many new titles came to life, but if they did not achieve enough sales, they were liquidated immediately. On the other hand, some series grew to enormous sizes, such as *X-Men* comics. A fan of the mutants, to keep up with the plot, had to buy a few to even over a dozen issues per month. Also, Marvel Comics was particularly fond of creating crossover events that brought together many superheroes. They promised harrowing events that would change the entire fictional universe, which, of course, rarely happened. Such comics crossover events were often scheduled several times a year, which made readers feel cheated by the lack of real changes.

On the other hand, the DC publishing company, facing the threat of incoming losses, decided to regain the interest of the readers and prepare a series of events to change the lives of its superheroes. Each of them soon had to face their biggest enemy in a fight to the death. In January 1993, as a result of a fight on the streets of Metropolis, Superman died. Long lines led to bookstores, limited issues reached incredible prices, and even television paid attention to the turn of events. It seemed that one of the leading symbols of American popular culture had died. The comics sales skyrocketed.

However, soon the incidents and stories about superheroes' fall lost their uniqueness, as their consequences were gradually reversed and Superman came back to life! The Americans understood one thing — the main hero will never die. Furthermore, if nothing untoward can happen to him, it does not make sense to follow his story. The fans once again started to lose interest in the adventures of superheroes.

Marvel Comics tried a similar operation by killing off their characters by creating the event *Heroes Reborn* (1996-1997). It met with colossal criticism from fans, and its effects were soon reversed. However, this did not save the decline in comic book

sales. Additionally, at the same time, to increase profit and curtail expenditure, Marvel decided to get rid of the brokers in the distribution chain. It resulted in a financial disaster and bankruptcy at the end of 1996 (Howe 249). Comic book stores were left with debts that they incurred to buy issues from publishing houses. By the end of the 1990s, almost 75 per cent of all sales points closed down (Tucker 74). The interest in comics decreased further and further.

After the triumph, recognition, and outstanding tales, the comics tumbled down into pulp stories full of absurd ideas. When the American society was going through economic growth and enjoying a state of relative peace in the world, the comics market faced a deep crisis. However, nothing lasts forever. Both American peace and the comics crisis ended abruptly with the fall of the WTC towers on September 11, 2001.

## **6. The Fifth Age The Comics Renaissance<sup>13</sup> in the Age of Anxiety (2001-till now)**

### **Comics and the crisis of 9/11**

The latest period in the history of comics symbolically began<sup>14</sup> on September 11, 2001, with the terrorist attacks in New York. 9/11 was one of the most important events in modern history that affected many aspects of the functioning of the state and transformed American society forever. After the terrorist attack, popular culture began to address the crisis, and a vast range of socio-political topics related to the reaction of the state or society to the attacks.

Cord A. Scott points out that comics artists were the first to start referring to these events in their works. He underlines that this was due to the artist's needs to explain critical social, political, and religious phenomena to young readers, as well as highlight their personal relationships with New York and experiences associated with this tragedy (Scott 100-101). Therefore, in connection with the terrorist attacks and changes in American society, comic book creators began to weave into the narratives political threads related to the fight against terrorism; problems of abuse of power by government agencies; issues of unlimited surveillance conducted by state institutions to improve security; and changes in the scope of protection of civil rights and freedoms by the state. Comics, more than cinema or television, and certainly faster than them, became an active medium commenting on the post-9/11 socio-political reality.

Comics artists decided to pay tribute to the victims and create charity anthologies entirely devoted to the attacks of September 11 like *9-11: Artists Respond, Volume One* (2002; Image Comics, Dark Horse Comics and Chaos! Comics), *9-11: The World's Finest Comic Book Writers & Artists Tell Stories to Remember, Volume Two* (2002,

<sup>13</sup> Also, in his book, comics author Grant Morrison, writes about the comics renaissance.

<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Shirrel Rhoades notices numerous changes in the American comics at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and postulates the end of the Modern Age. However, he proposes 1999 as the starting date, making different arguments.

DC Comics), or Marvel's *Heroes: The World's Greatest Super hero Creators Honor The World's Greatest Heroes 9-11-2001* (2001), and *A Moment of Silence* (2002).

It's worth mentioning another outstanding graphic novel by Spiegelman, which he devoted to the 9/11 attacks, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) or a particular position emphasizing the importance of this medium for Americans, namely *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* (2006) by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón, which is a comics version of the official government report.

The most crucial decision affecting the genre of superhero stories was Marvel's commemoration of September 11, which influenced its entire fictional universe. Artists decided to directly show the attacks in #36 *The Amazing Spider-Man Vol. 2*, where superheroes and their greatest enemies stand together to help firefighters and police officers at the ruins of the twin towers.

## Superheroes deal with the aftermath of 9/11

Besides the issue, the 9/11 attacks were interwoven into the framework of the whole Marvel universe. In the new series, *Captain America Vol. 4* (2002-2004), the hero fought terrorists, both external and those hiding in the country as citizens. Another superhero Tony Stark became the Secretary of Defense in the Bush administration in *Iron Man Vol. 3*, and Nick Fury, director of the spy agency, S.H.I.E.L.D., started his private war with the terrorists in the mini-series *Secret War* (2004-2005) by Brian Bendis and Gabriele Dell'Otto. The latter also showed the negative consequences and repercussions of the fight against terrorism and violations of international law and policy.

An intriguing reference to the modern problems of USA was the crossover *Civil War*. In this story, US authorities decide to regulate the superhero problem by creating the Superhuman Registration Act. It ordered the registration and disclosed to the authorities the identities of all citizens possessing superhuman powers. Iron Man, despite his initial distrust, became an advocate of the new law and Spider-Man was one of the first ones that publicly took his mask off. On the other side of the barricade stood Captain America, the fighter for American freedom and democracy. He formed a new group, Secret Avengers, and the civil war between superheroes became unavoidable. Eventually, the Democrats gave in to the Republicans, as Captain America capitulated before Iron Man fearing a more severe conflict. Shortly after, his concerns about the new law were addressed in the next crossover event. In the *Dark Reign* story, villainous Norman Osborne used the Superhuman Registration Act database for his malicious purposes.

A similar infiltration theme could be found in DC comics, for example, in the mini-series *The OMAC Project* (2005) by Grega Rucka. Batman, as a hero with trust issues, decided to observe all the people with superpowers. He used Wayne Enterprises' funds and created the Brother Eye spy system. With its help, he gathered information about Earth's superheroes, including their true identities and weak points. It did not take long before supervillains took control of it.

In these three similar stories, references are made to the controversy surrounding the Bush administration's antiterrorist policies in the US. The most significant objections were raised by the Patriot Act, enacted by the US Congress in October

2001, which assumed broadening the authority of individual government institutions. Many commentators implied that such an act violated citizen's rights, allowing the invigilation of American people, which was not allowed by the constitution.

Although DC Comics did not decide to show 9/11 in their comics directly, the heroes sometimes brought up the event. Also, artists themselves metaphorically referred to the events of the time. The Iraq war was the theme in the story *For Tomorrow* from *Superman vol. 2*, in the issue called *American Nightmare* from the *JLA vol. 1*, or in the crossover *Black Reign* from the *JSA vol. 1* and *Hawkman vol. 4*. Image Comics also did not shun political topics, like in Larsen's *Savage Dragon*, where the title hero wins the presidential election as a candidate standing against George W. Bush and John F. Kerry. Moreover, after September 11, 2001, American comics significantly covered the subject of terrorism. According to research, between September 2001 and the end of 2004, comics from Marvel referred to this issue in 51.9 per cent of cases studied. Similarly, books from DC Comics referred to terrorism-related themes in 38.1 per cent of the cases, and from Image Comics research indicates that 28.1 per cent of the comic books studied were based on themes related to terrorism.<sup>15</sup>

## Comic Book market after the fall

The year 2001 also marked a shift in the financial functioning of the entire industry. In the 1990s, the comic book market was in crisis, and in the second half of the decade, publishing revenues dropped drastically. In 1997 and 2000, sales totaled \$300-320 million and \$255-227, respectively. The downward trend was reversed in 2001 when the value of market sales amounted to \$260-285 million. Since then, the number has been increasing each year. In 2007, according to various estimates, it was about \$660-700 million; \$870 million in 2013, and \$1.21 billion in 2019, which indicates the growing interest of the American society in this art form (Miller).

Another key feature of this era is also the increase in quantity and significance of crossovers events. From year to year, there were both small gatherings of several superheroes as well as significant events that involved all the previously released series. Soon such events were permanently entered in the publishing calendar so as to appear regularly, even several times a year. However, another characteristic trend was the reversal of the changes introduced in the superhero genre in the first half of the 90s: the dead superheroes were resurrected, living heroes returned to well-known incarnations and costumes, and teams from the old days gathered again in old squads.

It is also worth mentioning that Image Comics had strengthened its position — albeit third — in the market with a 8.04 per cent<sup>16</sup> share in 2019 (Miller). An essential figure within this company became Robert Kirkman, whose series *Walking*

<sup>15</sup> More comic book examples addressing the issues of terrorism, President Bush's politics, and the issue of security and civil liberties, along with a quantitative-qualitative (mixed method) analysis is included in a PhD thesis "Terrorism, politics, and civil liberties in the American comics after September 11, 2001, based on a comics analysis of Marvel Comics, DC Comics, and Image Comics" that was defended on January 26, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> For comparison: Marvel Comics — 40.30 per cent and DC Comics 29.23 per cent.



*Dead* debuted in 2003. It met with great appreciation from fans and critics and was twice awarded the industry's most prestigious Eisner Award. Kirkman's work shows a pessimistic vision of the post-apocalypse world where people are forced to fight for survival. Fatalism, the conviction of the inevitable fall of civilization, and the moral deterioration of humanity after the events of 9/11 hit a fertile ground in American society. Also, the titles that caught the attention of readers and critics such as *Chew* by John Layman and Rob Guillory, *Saga* by Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples, or *Southern Bastards* by Jason Aaron and Jason Latour, are worth mentioning.

Douglas Wolk also writes about a new period in the history of the comics, noting in 2007 that:

If there's such a thing as a golden age of comics, it's happening right now. As I write this, with that stack of new comics in front of me, it's obvious that there has never been as enormous a volume of extraordinary English-language comics published in a single year as there has been in the last twelve months (10).

The author, of course, does not mean single issues with adventures of superheroes, but comics in the form of graphic novels, which in the last two decades began to be published and sold in significant quantities. In 2006, their sales value exceeded that obtained from floppies, and in 2019 the proportions were 63.3 per cent (\$765 million) to 29.3 per cent (\$355 million)<sup>17</sup> (Miller).

Some of these graphic novels were just collected editions of superhero issues. Editors in DC and Marvel, noticing the increasing popularity of this format, began to introduce editorial changes within their comics. The stories began to have a clear beginning and end, which allowed efficient collecting of issues into larger editions. At the beginning of each comic book, a recap of previous events began to be included. It was to help new readers as well as reduce the need for exposure dialogues that, when reading collectively, become tiring repetitions.

It is also worth noting the appearance of a new form of sale during this period — digital distribution. The presented data, however, does not include digital subscription models like Marvel Unlimited service. Wandtke, while writing about contemporary comics titles, even uses the term *digital era* (208).

## The Third Wave in Hollywood

Another significant event that shaped the new reality of the comics industry is the massive interest in this medium from Hollywood. The Third Wave of film adaptations began on parallel with the commercial success of films such as *X-Men* (2000) and *Spider-Man* (2002). Producers in Hollywood began to show interest in comics to create works that would bring them huge profits. It is worth mentioning *The Dark Knight Trilogy* (2005, 2009, 2012), *Watchmen* (2009), and of course, the media franchise, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) produced by Marvel Studios, which is owned by The Walt Disney Company. The latest is an undertaking at an unprecedented scale in cinematography, where, like the comics, all film adaptations take

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<sup>17</sup> The remaining 7.4 per cent (\$90 million) relates to digital sales.

place in a shared universe, and individual characters appear in subsequent productions. Many of these films have been breaking ticket sales records. *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), being the 22<sup>nd</sup> film in the series, incurred revenues of nearly \$858 million in American cinemas and \$1.9 billion in the rest of the world, making it the most profitable movie in history<sup>18</sup>.

Not wanting to stay behind, DC Comics and Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., also started creating their movie universe – the DC Extended Universe (DCEU), with the premiere of *Man of Steel* (2013) which had Henry Cavill in a leading role. However, subsequent parts of the franchise met with moderate enthusiasm from critics and viewers, especially the *Justice League* (2017).

On the small screen as well, we find titles inspired by comic books. It is worth mentioning TV shows such as AMC's *Walking Dead* (2010-), *Smallville* (2001-2011), ABS's *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2014-2020), DC's series produced by The CW as *Arrow* (2012-2020), *Flash* (2014-) and others, or Marvel's Netflix series such as *Daredevil* (2015-2018), *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019), *The Punisher* (2017-2019), and others.

To conclude, the most significant movie hits of the last decade, works that broke financial records, as well as numerous TV productions, were adaptations of comic book titles. This trend will likely continue in the future. Even the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences honored the comics adaptation of *Black Panther* (2018) with a Best Picture nomination and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) won an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature.

The publishers also decided to use the popularity of the Third Wave to attract new readers who had not read comics before. In September 2011, DC Comics decided to reset its universe. All series were canceled, and the publication of 52 new titles began – hence, the name *The New 52*. A year later, Marvel Comics announced *Marvel Now!* a similar initiative with a view to attract new readers. Most comics stories have stopped referring to previous adventures from years ago to attract new fans.

## The shift towards diversity

It is of the essence to highlight that Marvel Comics, for almost two decades, has worked on the ethnic and gender diversity of its superheroes. At the beginning of the century, changes were made within the Marvel Ultimate comics, like introducing the Afro-American version of Nick Fury or an Afro-Latino teenager called Miles Morales, who became the new Spider-Man. With the *All-New Marvel Now!* initiative, Marvel began to introduce similar changes in its main universe.

In April 2014, the *Ms. Marvel vol. 3* series debuted, the main character in which was a teenager named Kamala Khan, an American of Pakistani descent and a Muslim. In December of the same year, in *#25 Captain America vol. 7*, Afro-American Sam Wilson, the former Falcon, became the new Captain America. Furthermore, in December 2014, in *Thor vol. 4*, the title of the Norse God has been given to a woman Dr. Jane Foster. Some critics and fans praise the Marvel publishing house for reflecting the cultural and racial diversity of American society. In contrast, others criticize

<sup>18</sup> Excluding rankings for the movie's revenue with inflation estimated.

it for excessive political correctness and the desire to increase sales through radical and controversial changes in the established comics canon.

All of these factors: a) the impact of 9/11 and socio-political themes ; b) strengthening of the position of Image Comics as the third major comics publisher ; c) increase in sales of graphic novels, including collected editions ; d) digital distribution ; e) a multitude of titles not belonging to the superhero genre ; f) significance of crossover events ; g) reversing the changes from the 1990s ; h) the Third Wave of film adaptations ; i) increasing the representation of ethnic minorities and gender diversity ; and j) the multitude of marketing campaigns that try to attract new readers, are the elements characterizing a new age in the history of comic books. The period, which symbolically began on September 11, 2001, continues to this day.<sup>19</sup>

## Summary

The article presents a new proposal for the periodization of the history of American comics. It makes the division into six distinctive epochs, each with a unique name, a specified time range, along with the borderline events. In course of the chronological descriptive narration, the changes and evolution of the medium are explicitly described. From prehistoric proto-comics, through newspaper comics strips, to comic book magazines, graphic novels, and the current modern state and shape of the comic book market, each era has been provided with its distinguishing characterization, themes, happenstances, creators, and their works. For a thorough summary, all these elements have been grouped and summarized in the table below. As the new proposal is based on the revision, critique, and the need for an update of the existing assumptions in the form of Berger's proposal and *Olympic/Mainstream* periodization, corresponding summaries were also prepared for them in separate subsequent tables.

**Table 1.** Determinants for a new proposal of the periodization of American comics

Name and Time Period	Determinants and Characteristics
<p><u>The Zero Age</u> <i>The Time of proto-comics</i> (-1895/'96)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– prehistory of comics: elements of comics narration (combining image and words) in various forms of art</li> <li>– origins in the form of cartoon political satire (the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in France or in England)</li> <li>– proto-comics among creations of painters: William Hogarth, Rudolf Töpffer, Gustave Doré, and Wilhelm Busch)</li> </ul>

<sup>19</sup> In the first and second quarters of 2020, we observe an unprecedented situation on the US comics market, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Comic book stores have been closed, which may mean bankruptcy for many, the releases of new issues have been suspended, Diamond Comic Distributors, Inc. suspended both local and international distribution, and DC Comics decided to terminate the exclusive contract with this company. All these factors can seriously affect the shape of the entire industry and lead to a series of transformations. Perhaps we are observing the end of one era and the beginning of another. However, such a conclusion requires further observation of events and their effects.

Name and Time Period	Determinants and Characteristics
<p><u>The First Age</u>  <i>The Gold Age of newspaper comic strips</i>            (1895/'96-1929)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– symbolic birth of American comics – (February 17, 1895, or February 16, 1896 – first appearance of the Yellow Kid or first appearance of the Yellow Kid in color)</li> <li>– comic strips became popular among the immigrants</li> <li>– the most characteristic elements of the comics appeared and solidified like frames or statements of the characters placed in speech balloons</li> <li>– most influential comics of this period: <i>The Katzenjammer Kids</i> by Rudolph Dirks, <i>Little Nemo in Slumberland</i> by Winsor McCay, <i>Mutt and Jeff</i> by Bud Fisher, and <i>Krazy Kat</i> by George Herriman</li> </ul>
<p><u>The Second Age</u>  <i>The Time of Adventurers, Superheroes and their Comics Magazines</i>            (1929-1961)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– January 7, 1929 – <i>Tarzan of the Apes</i> and <i>Buck Rogers</i> – first comic strips adventures</li> <li>– April 1929 – <i>Funnies</i> – the birth of the comics magazines</li> <li>– April 18, 1938 – <i>Action Comics</i> – Superman and other superheroes from the universe of DC and Marvel emerged</li> <li>– post-war decline in the interest in the superhero genre and the rise of horror and war stories</li> <li>– establishment of the Comics Code</li> <li>– popularity of comics for children (e.g. Walt Disney characters)</li> <li>– comics with child themes but aimed at mature readers – <i>Pogo</i> by Walt Kelly, Charles Shulz's <i>Peanuts</i> or <i>Little Orphan Annie</i> by Harold Gray</li> <li>– First Wave of movie adaptations</li> <li>– return of the interest in the superhero genre</li> </ul>
<p><u>The Third Age</u>  <i>The Marvel's Revolution and the Time of the Underground Comix</i>            (1961-1978)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– November 1961 – Marvel's revolution in the superhero genre – <i>Fantastic Four</i> and many other titles</li> <li>– joint adventures of superheroes, highlighting a shared universe, narrative changes, attempts to refer to contemporary events</li> <li>– Comix from the underground that avoided the auto-censorship of the Comic Code</li> <li>– the fall of the Comics Code (summer 1971)</li> <li>– Changes after the liberalization – the return of the horror themes, grimmer comics plots i.e. "The Night Gwen Stacy Died", the rise of the minority superheroes, erotic threads</li> </ul>

Name and Time Period	Determinants and Characteristics
<p><u>The Fourth Age</u>  <i>The Time of Triumph and Death</i>            (1978-2001)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 1978 – <i>A Contract with God</i>, by Will Eisner – first <i>graphic novel</i></li> <li>– 1978 – <i>Superman</i> directed by Richard Donner, premiered and spearheaded the start of the Second Wave of movie adaptations</li> <li>– 1980-1992 – <i>Maus</i> by Art Spiegelman</li> <li>– <i>The Dark Knight Returns</i> (1986) by Frank Miller and <i>Watchmen</i> (1986-1987) by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons</li> <li>– recognition and appreciation of the comics as an art form</li> <li>– British invasion and darker themes in comics</li> <li>– more political and social issues in comics</li> <li>– Comics Crossover Events</li> <li>– the rise of independent publishers – Image Comics</li> <li>– changes in the comics market – specialized points of sale emerged</li> <li>– crisis of the 1990s and the decline of interest in the superhero genre</li> </ul>
<p><u>The Fifth Age</u>  <i>The Comics Renaissance in the Age of Anxiety</i>            from 2001 till now</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the impact of 9/11 and socio-political themes</li> <li>– strengthening the position of Image Comics as the third publisher</li> <li>– increase in sales of graphic novels, including collected editions</li> <li>– digital distribution</li> <li>– a multitude of titles not belonging to the superhero genre</li> <li>– significance of crossover events</li> <li>– reversing the changes from the 1990s</li> <li>– the Third Wave of film adaptations</li> <li>– increasing the representation of ethnic minorities and gender diversity</li> <li>– the multitude of marketing campaigns that try to attract new readers</li> </ul>

### 8.2 Arthur Asa Berger's periodization

Name and Time Period	Determinants and Characteristics
<p><u>The Innocents</u>            early 20th century to 1920</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– comics heroes like children, prone to violence and cruelty</li> <li>– pure situational humor</li> <li>– (like society) heroes are unsure of their fate or future and feel overwhelmed by life in large cities</li> <li>– <i>The Yellow Kid</i> (as the reflection of the harsh living conditions of poor metropolitan residents)</li> <li>– <i>Mutt and Jeff</i> (as the reflection of the process of questioning American individualism or the myth of the self-made man)</li> </ul>

<p><u>The Modern Age</u> from 1920 till 1960</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Americans lost their innocence; the society itself ended the process of urbanization and entered the stage of mass consumerism</li> <li>– comics heroes became proponents of specific ideas</li> <li>– <i>Buck Rogers</i> (as an optimistic response to a time of crisis)</li> <li>– <i>Flash Gordon</i> (stated that the American idea of democracy is the superior one)</li> <li>– <i>Little Orphan Annie</i> (undermined faith in the American dream and democracy)</li> <li>– <i>Pogo</i> (directly mimic and commented on the American reality)</li> <li>– <i>Peanuts</i> (a commentary on the condition of man and the whole society in the modern world)</li> </ul>
<p><u>Age of Confusion</u> from 1960</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– comics as the reflection of the turbulent changes in American society and the countercultural revolution</li> <li>– the artists tried to comment on reality, focusing heavily on politics and difficult social topics</li> </ul>

### 8.3 The Olympic / Mainstream periodization

Name and Time Period	Determinants and Characteristics
<p><u>The Golden Age</u> 1938 till 1956</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the birth of superheroes (#1 <i>Action Comics</i>)</li> <li>– creation of famous heroes from the DC Universe like Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Flash, etc.</li> <li>– creation of famous heroes from the Marvel Universe like Human Torch, Namor, and Captain America</li> <li>– establishment of the Comics Code</li> </ul>
<p><u>The Silver Age</u> from 1956 till circa 1970</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– return of the Golden Age superheroes (Flash in #4 <i>Showcase</i>)</li> <li>– premiere of the <i>Fantastic Four</i> and the real birth of the Marvel Universe</li> </ul>
<p><u>The Bronze Age</u> circa 1970 till circa 1985</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– comics begin to refer to social issues</li> <li>– the end of the Comics Code</li> <li>– return of the horror genre</li> <li>– grimmer plot lines i.e. “The Night Gwen Stacy Died”</li> <li>– rise of the minority superheroes</li> </ul>
<p><u>The Modern/Dark Age</u> circa 1985 till now</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– dark themes in comics</li> <li>– more political and social issues in comics</li> <li>– crossover events</li> <li>– rise of independent publishers</li> <li>– the artistic and commercial success of such titles as <i>Batman: The Dark Knight Returns</i> and <i>Watchmen</i></li> </ul>



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