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## **Comic Books as the Modern American Mythology**

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This article describes comics as a modern form of mythology. Comic book artists not only adapt well-known American myths, such as the power of money (Batman) or America as a home for immigrants (Superman), but they also co-create new ones along with other cultural works. For one of the characteristics of mythology is taming, explaining and commenting on reality in the form of fantastic tales. All of American history and the image of society can be found in comics. The lives of immigrants in the early twentieth century and experiences of the World Wars were illustrated in short comics that appeared in the daily press. The events of the Cold War such as the arms race and the Vietnam War were portrayed through the eyes of famous characters such as the Fantastic Four and Iron Man. Comics were also the target of Puritan society. Just like the Hays Code concerning cinema, the system of self-censorship called the Comics Code limited artistic freedom and forced some artists to create underground. In turn, the counterculture of the 1960's led to a gradual liberalization, allowing the adventures of African and Afro-American superheroes to be published. Likewise, the economic crisis of the 1970s, problems in American society and the Reagan era are reflected in such comics as *The Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. Surprisingly, the economic boom of the 1990s brought about a creative crisis and financial troubles among publishers. Last but not least, the events of 9/11 gave comic book stories new power when superheroes began to fight against terrorists and to explore the issue of what is more important: national security or civil liberties. All of this indicates and highlights that the history of American comic books is closely linked with the history of the American nation.

Culture has always been a lively element, always changing and morphing with the society which used it. When a society evolves, it also changes its language structure and its cultural creations. Old beliefs, opinions and rituals lose their meanings and become traditions without functionality. Changes in culture are perfectly visible in the mythology of a society, because, as Bronisław Malinowski says:

Myth, as a statement of primeval reality which still lives in present-day life and as a justification by precedent, supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order,

and magical belief. [...] Myth is, therefore, an indispensable ingredient of all culture. It is, as we have seen, constantly regenerated; every historical change creates its mythology [...] (Malinowski 91-92).

Therefore, if a cultural-social change happens, it must be accompanied by a mythology reinterpretation. It is so because myths contain a symbolic representation of current problems, and “[...] as Paul Ricoeur proved, every myth – also pop-cultural myths – fulfills the symbolic function and has interpretative power, which lets certain stories assimilate various problems in a current historical time and certain cultural circle” (Kłobukowski 201). Therefore, the phenomenon has to do with movies, series, literature and comic books.

In a PWN series devoted to the history of literature, under the term “comic” we can see the following definition: “it is characterized by the current urban folklore, and uses stereotypical plots based on basic moral values and the creation of characters with mythological features” (“Współczesność” 127). Among the characters which are considered contemporary heroes there were of course Superman and Batman. Zygmunt Kałużyński also describes a comic about a man in a bat costume as one of the American myths.

On the one hand, the great topic of the American culture: violence; on the other hand – the obsessive cult of justice. That is why Batman is a myth, it corresponds to the needs of the country. We have thousands of comics, but this one is unique, because it underlines the problems of a civilization which slowly becomes world-wide (Kałużyński, Raczek 86).

Kałużyński also quotes the opinion of a sociologist, Brunon Bettelheim, who described Bruce Wayne as the reflection of the American complex (Kałużyński 41). A film journalist Janusz Wróblewski, writing about Batman, underlines the American myth about omnipotence granted by money (Wróblewski 56). It is also worth mentioning that Slavoj Žižek (*Patrząc z ukosa*) believes that pop-cultural works (including comics) reflect the social moods much better than classic or high culture works, and they contain hidden ideological and political content.

It was not a coincidence that it was in the United States that the picture stories were born. European culture celebrated the cult of word even since ancient times, exalting the widely understood literature above every other form of art. For the Americans, the universal message of images became much more important, and, above all, more practical than English words. America is the country of immigrants, and its unusual economic growth since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was based mostly on cheap workforce of the immigrants. Those were poorly educated people who did not know any language except their native one. All that was required of them was hard and diligent physical work. Many of the immigrants never learned the English language, and the acculturation happened only two generations after. However, the desire to associate with the culture, even in the simplest form, was common nonetheless. Partly it was fulfilled within the circles of their ethnic groups, but the Anglo-Saxon intelligence also participated with 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 conquest of the Wild West

(Toeplitz 26). These colorful magazines were only a few steps away from the comics published in newspapers.

Until 1919 there was an era called the golden age of press comics. The characters included in those showed belief in the so-called *American Dream*, but also a strong disappointment due to the inability to achieve it. Their stories were connected by alienation from the society linked with the strong urge to be a part of it. The press comics of those times vividly showed the contemporary state of the American society (Berger 18). The immigrants found their own problems and perplexities in the comics, so they willingly bought newspapers, which gradually raised the prints. Due to the rising popularity of the comics, soon there were magazines which printed only picture stories.

Another era in the history of comics I personally call "The period of superheroes and their extraordinary adventures (1929-1961)". The protagonists in those stories are persons with extraordinary skills and superhuman powers, similar to heroes from the ancient myths. They fight against injustice and evil, and represent all the American virtues. Those heroes became the embodiment of the uniqueness of the American nation. Their appearance is connected to a series of events happening in those years: the victory in World War I, economic prosperity of the '20s, the Big Recession and World War II (Toeplitz 61-63). A good example of a character merging science fiction with the vision of an American patriot is definitely Superman created by Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel. In June 1938 their comic first appeared in the *Action Comics* magazine and became a sensation. Its popularity was so big that a year later another magazine was released. It was called *Superman* and it contained only the adventures of the title superhero. (Beatty et al. 300). In time, more iconic comic heroes were born, such as Batman (*Detective Comics* #27 May 1939) or Captain America (*Captain America Comics* #1 March 1941).

The end of World War II was supposed to bring peace to the world, but instead the Iron Curtain fell over Europe, and the former allies became enemies. The Cold War era had begun and it was the only total conflict happening in every aspect of public life. A nuclear war became a real threat when, in 1949, the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic bomb. They had the ability to construct it thanks to spies working in the USA. When the trials of the Soviet spies began, the fear of communism called the Second Red Scare fell over the American society. Senator McCarthy formed an investigative commission in order to track down spies and agents, but the cure turned out to be worse than the disease. The most common victims of the witch hunt were usually innocent famous people such as Charlie Chaplin. The fear of agents turned into fear of being accused as one (Brogan 651-669). In such atmosphere after a few years of absence Atlas Comics (currently known as Marvel Comics) revived Captain America in 1953. The phrase advertising the comic was *Captain America Commie Smasher!* and his first mission was to stop Red Skull (his second incarnation was Albert Malik) who was a leader of a criminal organization tied to the USSR. An attempt to change the image of the hero and turning him into an icon of American patriotism was not received with enthusiasm by the readers. After eight issues the series was terminated, and the superhero had returned in the 1960s.

Another era in the comic history was related to Marvel Comics and the famous Stan Lee. In November 1961, as a response to a renowned title of the competition, the *Fantastic Four* comic was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. There were various

elements which made this series different from their predecessors. First of all, the adventures happened in New York instead of a fictional city. This allowed public figures to appear in the storyline, and real historic events influenced the characters.<sup>1</sup> The genesis of their superpowers was related to the arms race and the beginning of the space programs. A few months before, a Soviet Astronaut, Jurij 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 America. Another thing was double identity. The Fantastic Four members were the first ones to reveal their real names, which made them idols among the New York citizens. Yet 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 at the cost of deforming his body. Depression, connected with short fuse causes many arguments within the team. Each of the heroes has been given at least a few issues which they have to deal with on daily basis besides saving the world. Thus, the appearance of the Fantastic Four started an era which I personally call "The period of superheroes and their ordinary problems (1961-1980)."

Another famous character is Hulk, who made his first appearance in May 1962, with grey skin at that time. The comic has similarities to Frankenstein and Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde. Also it refers to the fear of atomic bombs and radiation effects. After many years of comic adventures, the authors focus on Bruce Banner's schizophrenia and childhood trauma as well.

In August 1962 Thor has his debut in *Journey into Mystery*. An idea to use a mythological god in a comic book appeared in Stan Lee's head when he described superheroes in a radio program as mythological heroes of the American culture. The adventures of Thor were filled with fantasy plotlines and followed the Norse mythology. It did not stop the God of Thunders from fighting along with American soldiers in Vietnam or being captured by communists.

Another Marvel superhero took part in the Indochina conflict, having also been born in the Vietnamese jungle. In the March 1963 issues of *Tales of Suspense* Tony Stark visits American soldiers in Vietnam and shows them the newest achievements of military technology. As a result of an ambush he gets captured by the communists from North Vietnam. Their leader, Wong-Chu gives him an offer – he either builds a weapon able to throw the capitalists out of their country or he is executed.

In September of the same year, the Lee-Kirby duet opens Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, where the original X-Men team (Cyclops, Beast, Iceman, Angel and Marvel Girl) learns to control their powers under the supervision of Professor Charles Xavier. Under the veil of stories about discrimination against mutants, parallels to African-American situations can be found. Their fight for citizenship rights started around the mid-1950s. Along with the "insubordination" of the black Rosa Parks, who refused to give her seat on a bus to a white man. It is also worth mentioning that on the year when the mutants were born there was the March on Washington, where Martin Luther King gave his "I have a dream" speech.

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<sup>1</sup> A similar procedure took place with Captain America, who fought the Nazis during World War II.

The fight for the second emancipation of the Afro-Americans in the USA was one of the turbulent events of the 1960s counter-revolution. Young Americans denied virtues which their parents considered the most important. Career, material wealth and competition ceased to be the marker of development and personal success. As a result, various, often polarized, attempts to change the society came to life. From the radical struggles of the Black Panthers to the passive resistance of Martin Luther King, from free love on Woodstock Festival to Hell's Angels' excesses on the Rolling Stones concerts, putting flowers into gun barrels, or even spitting and pouring paint over war veterans. The hearts of the American youth were conquered by Rock&Roll, drugs and the new subculture lifestyle, especially the hippies. There was a wave of fascination by eastern religions such as Buddhism, the Kabbalah, Hare Krishna or Hinduism along with the New Age movement, Occultism or Satanism. Sensing noticeable interest in such themes, Stan Lee, with an artist Steven Ditko published a story called *Dr. Strange Master of Black Magic!* in the *Strange Tales* magazine in July 1962. Thus, another superhero, Doctor Stephen Strange joined the Marvel family with his adventures filled with magical artifacts, magic, demons and journeys through dreams and between dimensions.

The last superhero I want to mention is Black Panther, who had his debut in July 1966 as the first African superhero. The similarity between his name and the radical organization fighting for Afro-American rights is a coincident, since the group was founded a few months later. It is possible, however, that the name of the character was an inspiration for them. T'Challa, also known as the Black Panther, is the leader of the Panther Clan and king of a fictional African country Wakanda. It is one of the richest countries in its region, and it has access to new technologies as well as tribal magic. The hero himself is a genius, and his powers are granted by his protective African god (Howe).

The '60s in comics are also called the years of the Comic Underground. As the film was subjected to auto-censorship, the comic also had its restrictions. In 1954 one of the minor comic publishing companies was called before the senate commission in order to be investigated for possible harmful influences of comics on children.<sup>2</sup> It was founded after the release of Dr. Wertham's book *Seduction of Innocent*, which contained psychological research and was very critical towards the comics. One of its famous theses was the information about potential homosexual propaganda, which was said to occur in Batman and Robin adventures. The publishers, who were afraid to have restrictions imposed upon them by the authorities and who feared that they might lose their readers, implemented the auto-censorship system called the Comics Code. The comics which complied to the rules were given a special mark informing about the safe content of the publication. The Comics Code forbade presenting monsters (such as vampires or werewolves) who fought criminals or corrupt policemen. Nudity, vulgarisms, excess violence, or even minority protagonists were forbidden as well. It was not allowed to show social pathology, sexual deviations or behaviors which undermined the image of an American family (Szyłak 46-49).

The artists who would not want to conform to the code, began to publish in underground companies. The history of the comic underground is strongly associated with the independent press of the '60s. It was such gazettes as New York's *East*

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<sup>2</sup> EC Comics represented by William Gaines.

*Village Other* or *Los Angeles Free Press* who showed the first cartoon stories. 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 originally consisted only of works of Robert Rumb (the creator of *Fritz the Cat*), but quickly it gained new artists to draw for it. A part of the underground comics showed ordinary people from the lower class struggling with everyday reality. Problematic phenomena such as crime, drug addiction, unemployment or politician corruption were often pictured. For the first time the subject of homosexuality was presented. On the other hand, some of the creators attracted readers by creating stories containing hard pornography, sadism and macabre.

The Comics Code was first compromised by Marvel in 1971. *The Amazing Spider-Man* #96-98 told a story about people struggling with drug addiction. Although the story showed drug abuse in a definitely bad light and was created on request of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, it was the drug-related theme which prevented the authorization. Despite that, Stan Lee decided to publish the issues without the Comics Code mark on the cover, which was the first step towards the abolition of the auto-censorship restrictions. DC followed Marvel's lead by publishing its first story containing drug abuse problems a few months later. The October issue of *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* focused on Roy "Speedy" Harper, Green Arrow's sidekick, who turned out to be a heroin addict. The fact that the comics were published with the CC mark was a sign that the system became more liberal.

Another important issue which shocked the readers and broke the CC was *The Amazing Spider-Man* #121-122 from 1973. The story *The Night Gwen Stacy Died* depicted Peter Parker's girlfriend being killed by the Green Goblin. Nobody expected such an important and liked protagonist to be harmed in any way. Gwen's death added a new, dark tone to the comics, which reflected the grim atmosphere of the '70s.

As the Comics Code was weakened, new horror-style heroes could start to show up in comics. Swamp Thing debuted in 1972 in the June-July issue of *House of Secrets*. The story was happening around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it told about an accident of a scientist Alex Olsen caused by a jealous assistant. The interest of readers was so big that DC executives decided to create a new series happening in those times.

Marvel, on the other hand, presented in August 1972 in *Marvel Spotlight* a story of a biker Johnny Blaze who made a deal with the devil to save his foster father. Tricked by the demon he becomes the Ghost Rider, whose task is to pursue fallen souls. Johnny cannot control his behavior when he becomes a burning biker, so his doings did not exactly fit the superhero style. Ghost Rider was therefore often called an anti-hero as opposed to lawful characters like Superman. The '70s, filled with morally ambiguous behavior of politicians with Nixon at the forefront, allowed a flood of such characters.

The counterrevolution caused the second wave of feminism and second wave of African-American emancipation. The social changes could not be omitted in the comics. The '70s brought a number of female characters, however their provocative physical appearance might not be appealing to the feminists. In February 1973 in *Conan the Barbarian* Red Sonya debuted, whose bikini armor became a model for heroine costumes. The following important female protagonists were counterparts of already existing characters. In February 1977 in *Marvel Spotlight* appears Spider-

-Woman, and February 1980 brings Bruce Banner's cousin, She-Hulk. Storm, a part of the new X-Men team since May 1975 is also worth mentioning. Not only is she a powerful female mutant, but also the first African female superhero.

The appearance of the Black Panthers started a trend for Afro-American superheroes. In September 1969 in Captain America series debuts Falcon who becomes a friend and partner of Roger. DC responded with John Stewart, the first Afro-American member of the Green Lantern Corps, who shows up in the series at the turn of 1972. Already in the first mission his loyalty was put to trial when he had to protect a politician known for his racist views. It is impossible not to mention a very popular superhero with exceptional esteem among his fans. In June 1972 the first issue of *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* was published. It tells a story of a young Afro-American who goes to prison as a result of his friend's betrayal. There he becomes a subject to medical experiments, which, after a guard's sabotage, grant him supernatural strength and endurance. With his new powers he manages to escape the prison and decides to become a superhero for hire. In time he starts to cooperate with Iron Fist, forming one of the most famous superhero duets.

The '70s are associated with the American statehood crisis, lack of trust towards the politicians, economic destabilization, and concern about one's personal safety. The biggest social issue was a wave of crime additionally fueled by rising unemployment and high prices. Some cities became synonyms of crime and danger, like New York since 1970. In 1976 serial murders by David Berkovitz started. The city lived in fear of the maniac for over a year. In the summer of 1977 New York experienced a few hours of chaos and anarchy when in the late evening a part of the city was deprived of electricity. Many people used the situation by robbing stores and homes or starting fires. In the '80s New York's situation became even worse. The drug called crack appeared. It was a substance that was cheaper than normal cocaine, more intoxicating and addictive. The citizens started to fear not only gang wars, but also ordinary drug addicts, who were able to kill for a few dollars to buy another portion of the drug. Bernhard Getz became a symbol of the fight against New York crime after he had shot 4 men on a subway station. In his testimony he claimed that it was an act of self-defense, because the men were trying to rob him. For many New York citizens Getz was a hero who took the matter in his own hands and served justice, a thing that the police was unable to do. For the others, especially the law enforcement, he was a murderer.

The crime problem and the anti-hero fad created the figure of Frank Castle aka The Punisher. He showed up for the first time in February 1974 in *The Amazing Spider-Man* as a dark character chasing after Spider-Man. In time this Vietnam veteran began to cooperate with the superheroes such as Daredevil or Captain America, but he never abandoned his usual methods of dealing with villains. At the dawn of the 1980s he had his first multi-part story, and received his own series in 1987.

The gigantic problem with crime in New York was one of the inspirations for Frank Miller to create the comic *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* published in 1986 (*Batman and philosophy*). The story took place in the near future, when Batman ceased his fight against crime and retired. Gotham City, without its protector, plunges in chaos and anarchy further and further, what forces Bruce Wayne to put on the costume once more. The new authorities are not pleased with the return of the masked avenger, therefore Batman has to fight not only against crime but also against the

law enforcement. In the background the Cold War conflict escalates, what results in a nuclear bomb detonation near Gotham. Batman, facing so many adversities, has to turn towards brutal ways in order to restore balance in the city. The noble cause becomes the only difference between him and the criminals.

The '80s was for the American society, despite crime and drug problems, a period of great hopes. In 1981 Ronald Reagan takes the Oval Office. As an adamant enemy of communism he is considered one of those who caused the fall of the Soviet Union. The Strategic Defense Initiative, popularly called the *Star Wars Program* was founded to build an anti-missile shield in space. It scared the USSR authorities and forced them into participation in a new arms race which pushed the Soviet Union onto the verge of bankruptcy. In internal affairs the anti-drug campaign, which focused on both prevention and fighting dealers, gained strong popularity. Ronald Reagan received recognition for implementing a republican economic vision assuming lowering taxes and cutting budget spending. Those actions significantly helped the American economy (Tindall, Shi 1321-1345).

Also in the world of comics that time was a new era of optimism and hope. "The period of triumph, death and life after death (1980-2001)" begins on December 1980 when in *Raw Art* magazine Spiegelman publishes the first episode of his work *Maus*. The action happens on two time planes: contemporary, where the character interviews his grandfather, a former prisoner in Auschwitz, and the past, from where the relation about the holocaust happens. To underline the artistic values and to deepen the hidden content, certain nations were presented as animals. Mice (Jews) were sentenced to extermination by cats (Germans). Spiegelman's work prove that the comic can touch serious and difficult subjects, which used to be reserved only for literature and film. *Maus* was begun to be called a "graphic novel", and it received the first Pulitzer Prize for a comic

A few years later, in August 1986, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, under the DC sign, created another outstanding graphic novel, *Watchmen*. Using the scheme of superhero stories they 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, and distinguished it on the list of 100 most important literary works of *Times* magazine.

At the end of the '80s DC decided to give a chance to stories aimed at mature readers. They invited British artists to cooperate, and new titles, such as Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* or *Hellblazer* gained great popularity and very positive reviews. The comics finally stepped out of the shade of literature and cinematography and gained the approval of critics, who more and more often dared to call them a genre of art. It appeared that the era of triumph would last forever or at least for many years. But, as always, greed proved to be the greatest enemy of art.

The '90s came to America with unprecedented optimism for the first time since World War II. Communism and the Soviet Union had fallen, and the United States of America won the Cold War, becoming the only international superpower in the world. The trauma after the loss of Vietnam War was overcome in 1991 during the Gulf War. With the help of CNN, USA and the whole world could watch the power of the American army who conquered Iraq in less than a month. The world believed Fukuyama and his "end of history" vision, therefore there was nothing else to do



but to develop the idea of liberal democracy and the market economic order. In 1993 Bill Clinton became president, and one of his main elective slogans was "It's the economy, stupid!". At the time of his presidency America had one of its greatest economic periods since World War II. The deficit was reduced and eventually budget surplus was achieved. Unemployment was decreasing and the GDP was rising each year. Dow Jones markers reached new records, and the shares in international export grew. Ordinary Americans felt the improvement in their financial positions and tried to improve their living standards with mass purchases (Zyblikiewicz433-473). In that decade consumption culture was predominant and shopping malls became new temples (Michalek 620).

The comic branch had always been a business in which income was more important than artistic values, and the Comics Code was a good example of that. High sales caused by the works of Miller or Moore fueled the publishers' expectations. Additionally, throughout the years collecting of comics, speculations, and buying issues with the intention to sell them at higher prices also developed. The publishing companies started to release special sealed episodes which 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 in order to have a full set. With less regard for the artists and their rights in relation to the big publishing companies it is easy to imagine that bigger sales were more important than the satisfaction of the critics and the readers.

In the '90s 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 huge sizes, such as the X-Men family of comic books. A fan of the mutants, in order to keep up with the plot development, had to buy a few to even over a dozen issues per month. To raise the profit and save on the provisions, Marvel decided to get rid of the brokers on distribution which resulted in a financial disaster and bankruptcy in 1997. The interest in comics decreased further and further.

The DC publishing company, facing the threat of impending losses, decided to regain the interest of the readers and prepare a series of events to change the superheroes' lives. Each of them soon had to face their biggest enemy in a fight to death. In *Knightfall* Batman had to confront all his enemies who had escaped Arkham. Eventually, at the brink of a mental and physical breakdown he was beaten by the perpetrator of the chaos – Bane. With a broken spine he barely survived and since then he had to move on a wheelchair, while Jean-Paul Valley aka Azrael became the new Batman. Superman had to confront a huge monster, Doomsday. In the January 1993 issue, as a result of a fight on the streets of Metropolis, the Man of Steel dies in the arms of his beloved. America went crazy about the story. Long lines led to bookstores, limited issues reached incredible prices, and even television gave attention to the turn of events. It seemed that one of the symbols of the American culture had died. The comic sales skyrocketed.

But soon all the incidents and stories about superheroes' falls lost their uniqueness, as their consequences were gradually reversed. Superman came back to life, Bruce Wayne recovered and returned as Batman, able to walk again. The Americans understood what we Europeans had known for a long time – the main hero will never die. And if nothing bad can happen to him, it does not make sense to follow his story. The fans once again lost interest in the adventures of superheroes. 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 enjoyed the state of relative peace in the world, the comic market had a deep crisis. Nothing lasts forever, though. Both the American peace and the comic crisis ended abruptly at the fall of the WTC towers.

The 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 is one of the most important and most recognized days in modern history. Every American divides their life to before 9/11 and after the attack. For the first time since the burning of Washington DC by the British in 1814 the United States were directly attacked on their continental territory. The final death toll was 5470 people including 265 plane passengers, 125 victims in Pentagon and 5080 people in the towers (Ostaszewski 813).

It is worth to look at comics published between August and October 2001. The stories written and drawn long before the terrorist attack which contain sinister omens. In August the DC company started a 3-month crossover with an intriguing name *Our Worlds at War*. A powerful cosmic entity called Imperiox detected instability in the universe, and the only way to avoid it is to destroy the Earth and cause another Big Bang. Superheroes and supervillains, under the command of president Lex Luthor decide to join their forces and fight together to save their planet. It is good to also mention Batman's investigation of the explosion and destruction of buildings under construction, damaging the twin towers belonging to Lex Corp. or prophecy of Ganthet, one of the Guardians of the Universe, which foretold an upcoming great conflict which would change the world's history.

In the Marvel universe there were also traumatic occurrences at that time. In *E for Extinction* Genosha, inhabited by 16 million mutants is burned to ashes by Sentinel robots. In the September issue of *New X-Men* Professor Xavier's pupils scour the ruins of the city in search for survivors. The Avengers try to stop Presence, who plans to genetically modify all the Russians and rebuild the power of his country to start a new war with America. Tony Stark in *The Big Bang Theory* has to face industrial terrorists who sabotage working factories. In one episode Iron Man's armor gets hacked and turned into a time bomb, and thus making its wearer a potential suicide bomber.

In December 2001 a special issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* was published, which referred to the 9/11 attacks. Peter Parker says the already famous words "We could not see it coming. We could not be here before it happened. We could not stop it. But we are here now". Superheroes and their greatest enemies stand together to help firefighters and policemen at the ruins of the two towers. Marvel decided to give the profit from selling the comics to families of the victims.

Due to the 9/11 events the comics received new political background for the actions of superheroes, new dangers and new enemies. Captain America began fighting against terrorists, both those living outside America and those hiding as citizens. Tony Stark becomes the Secretary of Defense and has to work as a superhero and as a politician. Sometimes war against terrorism, to be effective, has to balance on the edge of the law. When Nick Fury discovers a serious threat to his country and is not allowed to act to stop it legally, he forms a group of superheroes to send them to a special illegal mission in *Secret War*.

An intriguing reference to modern problems of America was the crossover *Civil War*. When, during a fight between New Warriors and their enemies, a big explosion

happens, killing over 650 people and destroying a significant part of Stamford in Connecticut, USA authorities decide to regulate the superhero problem. The Superhuman Registration Act comes to life, which orders registration and making public the identities of all citizens possessing superhuman powers. Spider-Man is one of the first ones to take his mask off, and Iron Man, despite his initial distrust, becomes an advocate of the new law. On the other side of the barricade stands Captain America, the fighter for American freedom and democracy. He forms a new group, Secret Avengers. The civil war between superheroes becomes unavoidable, and some of them are pushed to morally ambiguous choices. Eventually, the democrats give in to the republicans, as Captain America capitulates before Iron Man in fear of a more serious conflict. Some of the superheroes leave the United States, others receive amnesty from the government, and some of them decide to hide. Captain America gets prosecuted and imprisoned, and Tony Stark becomes the new leader of S.H.I.E.L.D. Soon after, the fears of the adversaries of the law come true, as in *Dark Reign* cross-over Norman Osborne becomes the new agency leader and uses the Superhuman Registration Act database for his own purposes.

A similar infiltration theme is to be found in DC comics. Batman, as a hero with trust issues, decides to observe all people with superpowers. He uses Wayne Enterprises funds and creates the Brother Eye spy system. With its help he gathers a lot of information about Earth's superheroes, including their true identities and weak points. Obviously, it did not take long before supervillains took control over it.

In those two similar stories we will find references to the controversy surrounding Bush's antiterrorist administration in the USA. The biggest objections were raised by the Patriot Act, enacted by the American Congress in October 2001, which assumed broadening the authority of certain government institutions. Many commentators suggested that such an act violated citizens' rights, allowing invigilation of American people which was not allowed by the constitution. The National Security Agency (NSA) was an institution that attracted special attention. In December 2005 the New York Times journalists revealed the Terrorist Surveillance Program (TSP), which consisted of electronic supervision over people suspected of terrorist activity (Domaradzki 198-200). Both controversies caused by the revealed information about invigilation underlined the liveliness of the topic: freedom or security?

As stated in the introduction, when a society goes through sudden and deep changes, it automatically affects their myths and adjusts them to the current social-political reality. In time Marvel company took WTC attack as a starting point for superhero activity, updating their genesis. Therefore Tony Stark is not a prisoner of communists in Vietnam, but captured by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Similarly, DC changed their characters' biographies to present their new, more contemporary image.

In September 2011, 10 years after the WTC attack, DC decided to do a big reset of their universe. All the series were wrapped up and 52 new series started – thus the name *The New 52*. The characters' appearance got refreshed, as did their appearances. Some of the events from the past was included in their genesis, while others were deleted. Other titles show the first years of the superheroes' activities, first confrontations with well-known villains and new friendships with other heroes. Seeing the readers' interest in new DC works, a year later Marvel announced the *Marvel Now!* revolution, which was to refresh the image of their universe. It is difficult to

wholly evaluate the new initiatives, because of how short they have lasted so far. As any other, this change needs time to discover its unique style, gain the recognition among the readers and become a part of the American mythology.

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