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# SUPERHEROES: THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF A GENRE IN A STUPID CULTURE

**Abstract.** *The genre of superheroes is troubling. How to explain the popularity of heroes with superpowers, strange fashion choices, and conservative ideological background? Many authors interpret superheroes in religious context. In contrast to this approach, Umberto Eco's analysis of the genre in his text on Superman traces the phenomenon back to ancient mythologies which the genre combines with the elements of modern age novel. Eco's approach should be supplemented by the analysis of transformations of the genre. The shift from the ironic self-referential tone of the early Superman and Batman films to the more serious tone in later adaptations is not a sign of progress but a regression. Shyamalan's Unbreakable, on the other hand, opens up a new way to interpret the genre.*
**Keywords**: *superheroes, genre, irony, religion, realism, Superman, Batman, Unbreakable*

## Introduction

Superheroes – as they are portrayed in comics or movies – are often regarded as an answer to a distressful human condition. The first edition of *Action Comics* where Superman was originally introduced appeared in 1938. Most of the interpreters see the resurrection of this superhero as a reaction to the context of its time: USA was still struggling with economic depression, poverty, and crime wave, the threat of Nazism was on the rise in Europe. So the premise is that when the world seems chaotic and meaningless human beings develop the need for a hero who can overcome such atrocities and, at least for the time of reading (or later watching), provide some sense of order, meaning and purpose.

It is not surprising that many authors pointed out the connection between the superhero genre and religion (Ortopeza, 2005; Lewis, 2014). Indeed, it is easy to discern in *Superman* – created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster – multiple echoes of Christianity. He comes from above, from another, presumably much more developed, planet Krypton, as a child of superiorly

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intelligent and morally impeccable parents. They sent him to underdeveloped Earth because their planet is facing total destruction. An ordinary American couple finds Superman and raises him with love and  affection not unlike Joseph and Maria took care of Jesus. When he grows up, aware of his powers, he leads a life of double identity: as Clark Kent, a shy and clumsy journalist, and as Superman who cannot be beaten and is called "the man of steel." Jesus is similarly but not as literally living a double life as a human being and a God in one person. Superman's agenda on Earth can be summed up by his slogan: "Truth, justice and the American way!" Although Christ's mission on Earth is a bit more complex, his main purpose is saving humankind by taking upon his shoulders the weight of its sins. From the story of his upbringing to his human yet godlike nature and his determination to help human race Superman functions as a secular urban version of Jesus for 20th century. Of course, we could also understand these religious interpretations of the superhero genre the other way around, interpreting the Biblical story of Jesus as an ancestor to (or precursor of) the superhero genre, in short, as the first comic about a superhero.

The thesis that superheroes somehow respond to everlasting human need for a greater power to make sense of the chaotic circumstances of our lives is nonetheless a little bit too shortsighted and indeed patronizing. It treats the readers or viewers of the superhero genre as an ignorant, infantile crowd which can be easily seduced by a modern fairytale, and, in this way, it misses the true enigma of superheroes and their impact: why do people like, watch, adore, enjoy the works on superheroes, although they are not really captivated by their religious or ideological narrative, i.e., although they know it is in the end just a stupid fairytale? The first lesson of popular ideology is perhaps very simple: you don't have to be an idiot to act as one.

This question doesn't concern only individuals but an entire culture: what kind of culture does a superhero genre presuppose? What is the function of this particular genre? Answering these questions will be one of the tasks of this paper. Our working thesis is that there are some difficulties with superhero genre, which are intrinsic to it and that its authors as well audiences are aware of them. Instead of interpreting this genre as a modern yearning for meaning or for new gods, we'll try to show that the superhero genre cannot be reduced to a naive attempt to provide comfort in an unpleasant world. What such a reduction misses is a certain reflexivity or self-knowledge inscribed into the superhero narrative from its very beginning. From this aspect, based on the study of primary sources – mostly selected movies – and secondary literature, devoted to studies of superhero genre with special emphasis on Umberto Eco's text "The Myth of Superman" we will try to show that contemporary remakes of the superhero movies cannot escape

from the intrinsic problems of the genre, although they pretend to be less naive and more perceptive to the psychic turmoil of the main hero.

## From Eco's Superman to the Mask

Let us begin with Superman since he is – as his name suggests – a prototype for every superhero.

Umberto Eco's text "The Myth of Superman" (Eco, 1972), the first semiotic analysis of this myth, is nowadays quite often criticized as being outdated, since superheroes and the genre itself have allegedly progressed so much since 1972, when the paper was first published. However, the text still provides an insightful analysis of the *Superman* comic series as well as of the genre itself.

Eco's basic line of thought is that Superman is a specific myth of our time. Although his figure displays many characteristics of his ancient predecessors such as Achilles or Hercules, a key difference separates them. The main structural feature of old myths and even religious myths is that their story and its ending as well as its moral massage, are already known to the public; Superman, on the contrary, holds superpowers, provides similar moral massage, but the plot, the ending varies from story to story (Eco, 1972: 15). This, however, does not mean that Superman simply follows the tradition of a novel, a modern genre developed in the West. Novel has to give up character's superpowers to introduce intriguing storyline. If the spectators' reaction to ancient tragedies was the one of pity and horror since they already knew the story, the readers of a novel get seduced by surprising turns and twists to which a fallible hero is exposed.

According to Eco, Superman is a mixture of both traditions. He is an archetypal hero, but a hero who gets involved in uncharted and surprising events. However, Eco doesn't forget to emphasize that this turns and twists don't really jeopardize Superman's archetypal character: in contrast to novelistic heroes, he doesn't develop, he remains the same. The reason for his "stable" personality resides in the serial structure of the superhero genre. Or, more precisely, new adventures which follow one another require an immortal hero, and immortality means that he cannot be affected by events or relationships he engages in[1].

At a different level, as Eco also states, the same holds for detectives from Sherlock Holmes and Poirot up to Columbo: they always remain the same, they don't gradually develop their capacities, since, although they are not immortal, they do display one supernatural quality. Their power of

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[1] *In general we distinguish two types of seriality: serials and series. While serial entails one storyline that is developed through several parts, series provides different and complete story for single part.*

reasoning is so perfect that we know in advance they will solve every case (Ibid.: 20). Eco also states that there is a specific temporality attached to such a superhero: "In Superman stories the time that breaks down is the time of the story, that is, the notion of time which ties one episode to another. In the sphere of a story, Superman accomplishes a given job (he routs a band of gangsters); at this point the story ends. In the same comic book, or in the edition of the following week, a new story begins." (Ibid.: 17)

Superhero therefore enjoys a specific ontological status: he is exempted from the causality chain which is the basic feature of our reality. Causality presupposes that things and people change in time and gradually approach their limit, death, and Superman clearly doesn't fall under the laws of time and change. This is why a Superman story does not begin from where the last ended but always starts form an imaginary pure beginning as if nothing ever happened. This type of series follows a matrix which is endlessly repeated (Ibid.: 17). More precisely, in every story our world is facing some kind of catastrophe (the type of this danger is the only thing that varies from story to story), Superman tries to save us, he has to overcome certain obstacles, flirts with Lois Lane in between, but at the end he manages to defeat the enemy (who is usually his archenemy Lex Luthor).

It is very important to acknowledge that superheroes as unchanging characters perfectly fit this form of endless repetition of the same scheme. The main character's lack of individuality or – to put it more precisely – the lack of any development, depth, complexity of his personality enables this type of series to function. Superhero's psychological monotony is intrinsic to the superhero genre. Eco tries to answer why this – as he calls it – highly redundant massage is so appealing to the public. He traces the answer in the changes of everyday cultural life during the last 200 years. People of 18th and 19th century lived predictable lives with everlasting rituals and obligations. Since their everyday life was quite dull, the novels provided the necessary excitement and entertainment. They craved for complex and developing characters who faced surprising events since this is exactly what was missing in their lives (Ibid.: 21). Modern times on the contrary put people under great pressure. The quantity of information, the vibrant, ever changing life, unexpected events in everyday experience made the terrain for a narrative that provides stability and rest. In Eco's words: "Is it not also natural that the cultured person who in moments of intellectual tension seeks a stimulus in an action painting or in a piece of serial music should in moments of relaxation and escape (healthy and indispensable) tend toward triumphant infantile laziness and turn to the consumer product for pacification in an orgy of redundancy?" (Ibid.: 22) The story is easy to comprehend, there is a clear line between the good and the bad, the moral massage cannot be argued with and the ending is always satisfactory as the good prevails etc.

However, Eco's analysis leaves out of consideration the libidinal economy that sustains the figure of the superhero, which is very important in understanding one of key features of a superhero: his mask. Joker, the supreme villain of Nolan's *Dark Knight*, makes it clear which is the goal of his terrorist attacks on Gotham City: they will stop when Batman will take off his mask and reveal his true identity – Joker is well aware that this will make Batman impotent. The logic of Batman's (or Superman's or Spiderman's) mask is given a comical twist in *The Mask* with Jim Carrey: it is the Mask which changes the ordinary guy into a superhero. The link between the Mask and sexuality is rendered clear in the second *Superman* movie: sex (making love to a woman) is incompatible with the power of the Mask, i.e., the price Superman has to pay for his consummated love is to become a normal mortal human. The Mask is thus the a-sexual "partial object" which allows the subject to remain in (or regress to) the pre-Oedipal anal-oral universe where there is no death and guilt, just endless fun and fight. It's no wonder the Jim Carrey character in *The Mask* is obsessed with cartoons. The universe of cartoons is such an undead universe without sex and guilt, a universe of infinite plasticity in which every time after a person (or animal) is destroyed it magically recomposes itself and the struggle goes on and on (*cf.* Žižek, 2011).

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This link can be further substantiated by what Lacan calls the Sadean fundamental fantasy: the fantasy of another, ethereal body of the victim, which can be tortured indefinitely and nonetheless magically retains its beauty (Lacan, 2005: 645–671). The standard figure in Sade's work is a young girl compelled to sustain endless humiliations and mutilations from her deprived torturer and somehow mysteriously surviving it all intact, in the same way Tom and Jerry and other cartoon heroes survive all their ridiculous ordeals intact. Therein resides the interest of stupid films like the *Home Alone* series: although the story seems to take place in a continuous diegetic place, it is clear that, with the final confrontation between the small kid and the two robbers, we enter a different ontological realm, a plastic cartoonspace in which there is no death, in which my head can explode, yet I go on as normal in the next scene.

If we return to Eco's main insight, most critics didn't try to prolong his analysis in this direction; they rather attacked his premise of predictability, redundancy, and stability of the superhero genre, since – as they point out, Superman in the movie franchise and in later popular cultural texts does experience personal development, he gains complexity and becomes psychologically more interesting. These authors see Superman's personal "growth" as a sign of better plotting and better characterization. However, this critique seems to miss the point: what Eco developed in his early text were the laws and accompanying difficulties of a certain genre, at least in its

original state. Even if his interpretation of the appeal of redundant super-hero genre is simplistic or even completely wrong, he nonetheless provides an important insight into the functioning of this modern age mythology and predictable series structure. At the same time one has to wonder what did the more sophisticated plotting and seemingly better characterization of superheroes really bring about. Is this really a sign of development, do superheroes really come closer to artistic excellence, when they become more troubled, more enigmatic, and more alike novelistic heroes? This brings us back to the question of superhero genre: why do genres exist and why do we have a superhero genre? While answering these questions the problem of superhero's politics also arises.

## The Genre and its Vicissitudes

When it comes to genre, theoreticians are usually very careful of giving a precise formula – it is hard to grasp crucial elements and features of a genre without the risk of providing a too inclusive or too exclusive definition (Bordwell, Thompson, 2012). So perhaps there is a better way to approach the problem of genre as well as the specific genre of superheroes. We can maybe learn more about it if we approach it from a different direction: by trying to trace the changes it underwent in the last decade and assess what they have brought. These changes are deeply connected with the passage from comics to TV and cinema. The superhero genre was born in the sphere of comics at the end of the thirties. In this media it thrived for decades until this very day, with its ups and downs. In the fifties it was incorporated into TV series and it reached movie industry in the late seventies.

This cinematic appropriation of a genre is in itself interesting, since – as Bordwell states (Bordwell, 2008) – there is no sign of superheroes in cinema for decades after they were created. A certain change in film industry had to occur so that this genre became possible or, to be more exact, profitable in the domain of expensive cinema industry. Steven Spielberg with *Jaws* (1975) and George Lucas with *Star Wars* (1977) introduced the concept of big blockbusters which soon became the leading production vehicle in Hollywood and is today the prevailing business model, to say the least. The superhero franchises became possible only after such a production turn in the seventies promised a massive appeal to comic's fans and their families, including new marketing possibilities from toy industry to video games. This production model was also intriguing because of its potential as a series – this structure of superhero comics found its way to the movies, functioning the way Eco already analyzed: endlessly repeating the same formula and, in this way, generating enormous profits. We can qualify the blockbuster business model itself as a

regression[2], as a turn towards infantilization of audiences that went along with conservative political and ideological concepts; the least one can say is that action movies including superheroes abandoned any problematization of the "American way." If F.F. Coppola with his *Godfather* trilogy (starting in 1972), Martin Scorsese with his *Taxi Driver* (1976), and Dennis Hopper with his *Easy Rider* (1969) (and many others) produced a certain critique of the American Way, emphasizing social traumas, acknowledging crime as a social symptom, etc., the blockbuster culture totally erased this American new wave and basically affirmed an unproblematic view of the American society. Or, as Eco recognizes in Superman comics: "In the sphere of his own little town, evil, the only evil to combat, is incarnate in a species which adheres to the underworld, that of organized crime. He is busy by preference, not against black-marketing drugs, nor, obviously, against corrupting administrators or politicians, but against banks and mail truck robbers." (Eco, 1972: 23)

However, as many critics pointed out, the superhero genre had changed and – in the last decade, at least – superheroes became much more interesting characters directly addressing politically much more challenging problems. But the true question is: what did these changes in the superhero genre really amount to? We will here mostly focus on *Batman*, one of the most successful movie franchises, with special attention to the changes it underwent in the last 30 years. The first *Batman* directed by Tim Burton, with Michael Keaton in a main role, came out in 1989 and proved to be a great commercial success. The story is well known. The city of Gotham is a degraded place of crime and villains; since police and other law enforcing institutions are powerless in their fight against this crime explosion, Batman jumps in and helps to get rid of criminals. There are, of course, criminals and criminals: it is easy to take care of the small time crooks like street robbers, and much harder with the great forces of evil such as Joker (Jack Nicholson). It is important to note that Batman, like Superman, has a double social identity. He lives as a superrich Bruce Wayne and only disguises himself as Batman when he tries to get rid of the lowlifes on the streets at night. However, in contrast to Superman, he doesn't have superpowers, but relies upon a very sophisticated set of arms, cars and other superhero gadgets; furthermore, his everyday ordinary person is not a poor clumsy journalist but an extremely rich high-tech industrialist.

It is obvious how this narrative frame completely follows a conservative fantasy: not only are the rich people the only ones who can save America's economy, diminish unemployment, etc.; the rise of crime against private

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[2]  *For thorough examination of political and ideological implications of the superhero genre, see Hassler-Forest, 2012.*

property is perceived as the only problem America has and, moreover, it appears as a problem that has no social context, no connection to class divisions. To turn to the plot, Batman faces Joker, a very picturesque villain with very immoral designs. When Joker captures Batman's girlfriend Vicky Vale the plot thickens but of course in the end Batman manages to find and beat Joker and the world falls back on its right tracks.

If this is the basic structure of the story, it is also important to analyze the stylistic approach to it. Burton follows the visual form of comics, with low angle shots, etc., but, more importantly, his *Batman* adopts a grotesque style and satirical approach discernible not only on the level of filming and montage but also in the comical stance towards the narrative material. Joker is, of course, the character that produces most comical remarks. For example: "Batman... Batman... Can somebody tell me what kind of a world we live in where a man dressed up as a bat gets all of my press? This town needs an enemy!" This comic vehicle is distinctive for superhero movies, and the *Superman* franchise, which began in the late seventies, also resorted to it. When, for example, Lois Lane asks Superman: "Um, um, would you like a glass of wine?", he responds: "Uh, no, no thanks. I never drink when I fly."

Such comical interventions are no coincidence; they are intrinsic to the genre itself. This humorous approach to the superhero material, usually (mis)perceived and dismissed as a sign of genre's regression or even of the lack of intelligence and artisanship, is, on the contrary, a sign of genre's self-reflexivity. If we look closely at Joker's remark above, we can read it as a comment on the movie itself. If we paraphrase it, he is saying: "What kind of world we live in where a movie about a stupid character wearing a bat suit is being made!" It is as if the genre is aware of its nonsensical premise, and it signals this knowledge by comical interventions and witty style.

Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005), also a big box office hit, is an example of another trend which is discernible also in the films about other superheroes like Superman and lesser heroes like James Bond. *Batman Begins* was praised for its characterization of the main hero, its dark atmosphere, and its interesting political undertone. Bruce Wayne alias Batman is fighting against Henri Ducard (Liam Neeson), his mentor but also a member of the mysterious League of Shadows which threatens to destroy Gotham City. In a lot of ways this movie is about the formation of Batman himself – it's a movie about the genesis of a superhero. Through flashbacks it shows how Wayne as a small child acquired a fear of bats (very superficially) linked to the death of his parents. Only by assuming the alter identity as a Batman can Bruce – with the help of his butler and father figure Alfred (Michael Caine), and Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman), a tech expert at Wayne Enterprises – confront what is tormenting him. In accordance with the well-known

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psychoanalytic formula, Wayne overcomes his fear of bats by way of identifying with the object of his fear – he becomes one of them.

This movie and the whole franchise lose all the humor and jokes – the price to be paid for relying on a seemingly complex psychological character. On a formal level, the movie is also made in the style of a *film noir* with dark, dramatic lighting, strangely twisted shots, etc. What we get is clearly an attempt to present the superhero as a serious and profound personality that fights his inner demons and is engaged in relevant political causes, with his nemesis Ducard as a sort of God from the Old Testament bent on destroying today's Gomorra. However, as Bordwell noticed in his blog, the political message of this movie is open to contradicting interpretations, conservative, liberal and Leftist (Bordwell, 2008).

There is something wrong in presuming that when a movie leaves behind a lighter, humorous mode, it can touch upon something relevant in a superhero himself or in the socio- political context in which he operates. The idea is, as many interpreters tried to show, that Nolan's *Batman* comes much closer to the truth about the strange superhero's subjectivity as well as about today's geopolitical situation than the earlier Batman movies. However, we could as well argue that it manages to achieve exactly the opposite. The much-vaunted fidelity to reality and to subjective truth relies on a much greater manipulation. The old *Batman* at least doesn't try to sell itself as a profound and relevant movie but rather emphasizes its genre characteristics and features, up to making fun of its hero, his costume and identification with bats. The psychologization of Batman in Nolan's version is masking the conservative premise of the genre (only a rich vigilante hero can restore the order in the USA, which is basically the untroubled functioning of the capitalistic system); not only is this premise not questioned, it even acquires additional weight insofar as its partisan is a character with all human faults, traumas, and pains, all of which is supposed to make the film somehow – artistically, politically, ethically – relevant.

Perhaps, however, there is another feature of our real lives which accounts for the growing uneasiness and discontent of being-a-superhero: the way the progressive immobilization of our bodies overlaps with bodily hyperactivity. On the one hand, we rely less and less on our proper body, our bodily activity is more and more reduced to giving signals to machines which do the work for us (clicking on a computer-mouse, etc.); on the other hand, our body is strengthened, "hyperactivated", through body-building and jogging, pharmaceutical means, as well as direct implants, so that, paradoxically, the hyperactive superman coincides with the cripple who can only move around by means of prostheses regulated by a computer-chip (like the Robocop). In his *Civilization and its Discontents* (1961), Freud deployed his vision of the human being as a "prosthetic God", manufacturing and using

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technological supplements to his finite and limited body to approach the ideal of omnipotence and omniscience. As expected from Freud, his point is properly dialectical: it is not that man cannot approach these ideals, troubles emerge precisely when he seems to approach them, but things take an unexpected turn:

Long ago /man/ formed an ideal conception of omnipotence and omniscience which he embodied in his gods. To these gods he attributed everything that seemed unattainable to his wishes, or that was forbidden to him. One may say, therefore, that these gods were cultural ideals. Today he has come very close to the attainment of this ideal, he has almost become a god himself. Only, it is true, in the fashion in which ideals are usually attained according to the general judgment of humanity: not completely, in some respects not at all, in others only half way. Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times. /.../ Future ages will bring with them new and probably unimaginably great achievements in this field of civilization and will increase man's likeness to God still more. But in the interests of our investigations, we will not forget that present-day man does not feel happy in his Godlike character (Freud, 1961: 39).

Is the "prosthetic God" as a cultural ideal not embodied in a series of superheroes from Batman and Spiderman to Superman (it is worthy to recall that the title of the last film about him, *The Man of Steel*, is the English translation of »Stalin«) who, if we judge from the latest wave of cinema remakes, are definitely not happy but haunted by anxieties and doubts. For us, common mortals, there is an unmistakable dimension of "beyond the pleasure-principle" in our dealings with artificial organs and gadgets: instead of just enhancing our pleasures and powers, they cause fear and anxiety. In the last decades, due to bio-technological breakthroughs, prostheses exploded and wiring our brains is around the corner, and "trouble" also exploded (Žižek, 2014).

If we return to the problem of the psychologization of the superhero it is interesting to observe the new *Superman* series. In the last decades two movies were made. *Superman Returns* (2006) still hangs on to some genre characteristic of self-reflexivity and joking, while *Man of Steel* (2013) provides a much more dark and profound characterization, as well as a more convincing plot of destruction by an alien enemy, which is army platoon that was able to escape from Superman's Krypton. This humanization in no way effectively undermines the mythic status of the superhero – in a dialectic way, it even strengthens it. Recall how, on back covers of many books, the author is presented by a couple of personal details ("In her free time, Miss Highsmith grows tulips and listens to Mozart...") – such details supposed to

demonstrate that the writer is human like all of us merely accentuate his or her exceptional status ("look, such a great writer, and nonetheless she has human foibles like all of us…"). The same strategy of ideological "humanization" (in the direction of the proverbial wisdom "it is human to err") pervades the ideological (self-)presentation of the Israeli Defense Forces: Israeli media love to dwell on the imperfections and psychic traumas of the Israeli soldiers, presenting them neither as perfect military machines nor as overhuman heroes, but as ordinary people who, caught into the traumas of History and warfare, commit errors and can get lost as all normal people. The message of such humanization is to emphasize the gap between the complex reality of the person and the role he has to play against his true nature – "In my family, genetic is not military," as one of the interviewed soldiers who is surprised to find himself a career officer says in Claude Lanzman, *Tsahal* (1994); Tsahal is a Hebrew acronym for the Israeli Defense Forces[3]. We find traces of such "humanization" even in the way North Korean propaganda presents their leaders: although they are generally divinized (say, their elementary school textbooks claim that Kim Yong-Il is so pure that he doesn't urinate or defecate), a North Korean official press release a decade or so ago which reported that, at the opening game of the country's first golf course, the beloved president Kim Yong-Il excelled, finishing the entire game of 18 holes in 19 strikes. One can imagine the thinking of a propaganda bureaucrat: nobody would believe that Kim put the ball into the hole with the first strike every time, so, to make things realistic, let us concede that, once, he needed two strikes… (Žižek, 2009).

What does this change of humanizing the hero effectively accomplish? First, it demonstrates that we cannot conceive the development of a genre as a progressive process from naive and stupid phase towards a self-enlightened postmodern phase in which the main hero becomes more profound and the plot more convincing. It is quite the opposite: the examples of *Superman* and *Batman* make it clear that it is the beginning of the series which mobilizes postmodern irony and self-referencing, while the later installments of the saga fall into the trap of fake profundity: presuming that they emancipated the plot or the hero by way of abandoning the humorous, ironic dimension, these movies render the same ideologically problematic plot in the disguise of a serious meaningful realism. The true lie resides precisely in the attempt to throw off the disguise and show a realist story. In this way, the idea of a superhero dressed up in a ridiculous costume with a ludicrous task and agenda becomes even more visible in its idiocy: it presupposes an audience so stupid and ignorant that it will treat the movie as a

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<sub>3</sub> *Ironically, Lanzmann follows here the same humanization-line as Spielberg, the object of Lanzmann's utter contempt.*

serious attempt to tell a meaningful story relevant to its time. The old super-hero genre at least didn't underestimate its readers or viewers since it let them know that they are participating in a ridiculous game. Here we can remember Eco's understanding of Superman's appeal and add to his inter-pretation that the superhero genre endeavored to overcome its problematic structure (combining mythical and modern novelistic features) through its comical, ironic and self-knowing approach. The enjoyment of superhero comes with the realization that we are indulging in a very problematic cul-tural material.

It is interesting that the state of popular culture and its consumers fifty years ago was in this sense much more developed than today when the humorous frame (which is a form of genre's self-reflection) is mostly aban-doned. The perception of the superhero story as a serious drama or even *film noir* is ultimately a sign of ideological blindness, nothing less and noth-ing more.

Rober Pfaller wrote a lot about a cultural shift which took place in the last 20 years, characterized by the rise of psychological and social realism, and by the concomitant fall of comedy or humorous approaches towards traumatic themes – a serious, dramatic approach is supposed to be closer to the truth (Pfaller, 2014). Pfaller sees this trend as a clear regression: it obfuscates the fact that a choice of tragedy over comedy is never a neutral or objective one. Furthermore, as Alenka Zupančič develops in her essay on Sturges' comedy (Zupančič, 2015), the appropriation of a genre enables filmmakers to grasp the problem in a much more appropriate way than when they make artistic movies which pretend to depict events in a realistic way. The attempts to get us closer to reality or to show things "as they really are", blind us for the fact that they are no less a fiction than other more humorous approaches – what makes them worse is the way they mask their fiction as an objective realistic document. This type of realism loses track of social totality (which cannot be represented in a direct realist way); it focuses on a particular subject's drama or problem, as if we only have to resolve this minor incident and the world will fall back on its tracks. Classical genre movies from comedy to *film noir* were on the contrary still able to comment on poverty, austerity, systemic and political corruption, etc.

## The Difficulty of Being Unbreakable

However, as we already indicated, this comical aspect of the super-hero genre is also ambiguous; there is also a darker side to it. In Ronald Reagan's 1980, there was a popular movie series *Ghostbusters* (1984) which turned around the superhero formula: a group of normal cynical individuals (headed by Bill Murray) establish an agency fighting evil ghosts. (The same

formula was taken over later in the *Men in Black* series.) Critics were quick to point out that *Ghostbusters* was the ultimate staging of the Reagan-era ideology: the struggle against dark forces of Evil is presented in a comical tone, as a kind of virtual game without real blood and suffering, in the same way as Reagan's propagandists presented armed conflict as a *Star Wars* adventure. The ironic distance in no way undermines hegemonic ideology; it is what makes it acceptable, since we can tell ourselves not to take too seriously the horrors of what we are doing.

So if we really want to undermine the status of a superhero, another strategy should be applied. Its best example is M. Night Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* (2000), a film which did for the universe of superheroes what Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) did for the figure of Christ. In both films, the hero is not "humanized" but presented as an ordinary human who finds it traumatic to assume the burden of being a superhero. *Unbreakable* is the story of David Dunn (Bruce Willis), an ordinary working-class American. When he is the sole survivor of a terrible train accident Elijah Price/Mr. Glass (Samuel Jackson) becomes interested in him. Being a victim of a terrible degenerative disease that make his bones break on even mild impacts Price starts to believe that, on the spectrum of all humans, his exact opposite must exist, and he sees that unbreakable man in Dunn. He helps Dunn slowly to develop confidence that he is in fact a superhero. However we find out that Price was responsible for several tragic accidents in his pursuit of his heroic counterpart.

The movie is an attempt to deal with the superhero frenzy; it addresses the obsessions of millions of people with comics. It is interesting that we can watch the movie in a naive way and take its premise seriously – superheroes exist among us, their strengths are just somehow enhanced with regard to ours. On the other hand we can read the film as an analysis of Prices's psychosis, and interpret David's superpowers as David's paranoiac projections – Price is so convincing that even David starts to believe in himself and falls under the spell of Price's psychosis. From this point of view the movie enables us to see superheroes in general as psychotic individuals who believe in their superpowers; the split personalities of many of them – including Superman and Batman – can be read as signs of their mental illness.

For this reason, *Unbreakable* functions a kind of symptomatic point of the entire superhero genre: it provides a clue to unlock the reasons why this genre is a troubled one. The premise of a hero who possesses superpowers, is possessed by a humanitarian care for all the people, and is morally superior, seems to puzzle the authors of the genre themselves. It is as if the mythical tradition that Eco traces in our modern genre cannot really co-exist with the genre's attempt to offer a relevant story in the mode of the modern novelistic tradition. This mixture creates a kind of knot, a knot that demands

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to be but cannot be cut. As we tried to prove, the authors themselves seem to be aware of this intrinsic contradiction.

In the history of the genre, there are different attempts to overcome this incompatibility. Its early versions in comics, TV and movies confront this problem with the introduction of humor and irony, which provide a sort of an alibi for people to freely enjoy the somewhat ridiculous narrative. However, acknowledging the discrepancies of the genre through the extensive use of self-referential jokes doesn't mean that ideological and political dimension of the genre is also overcome. Humor and self-ironic style help to sustain a conservative view of society embodied in Superman's agenda to defend the American way: what sounds as a neutral universal value is nothing but the idealized image of the everlasting status quo.

One way to render visible this ideological base of Superman is to play with alternate versions. The premise of Mark Millar's *Superman: Red Son* (DC Comics, 2003) is that Superman had been raised in the Soviet Union; the story (which mixes alternate versions of DC super-heroes with alternate-reality versions of real political figures such as Stalin and Kennedy) begins with Superman's rocket ship landing in a Ukrainian collective farm rather than in Kansas, so that, instead of fighting for "truth, justice, and the American Way", Superman is described in Soviet radio broadcasts as "the Champion of the common worker who fights a never-ending battle for Stalin, socialism, and the international expansion of the Warsaw Pact"... *Red Son* provides a nice case of the Brechtian "extraneation (*Verfremdung*)". The disturbing effect of Superman's rocket ship landing in Soviet Union, the spontaneous feeling that "something is wrong," that Superman landed in a wrong place, makes us aware of how the figure of Superman is firmly rooted in the American ideological universe.

We already dealt with many recent attempts to resolve the obvious structural problems of the genre by introducing a hero who is more complex, more profound, burdened by childhood traumas and human inadequacies, the premise here being that such an examination of human psyche and subject's deeper self makes the genre more realist, as if realism stands for some higher and more objective truth than the truth of the genre. It is not surprising that all this exposure of subjective wealth and hero's unconscious leaves the political and ideological core of the genre intact, the only difference being that the viewer or the broader culture is not given even the benefit of the doubt that it will recognize the mischievous nature of this newly found realism. At least the first readers and viewers of this genre were not forced to take the genre for granted since the genre gave notice of its weaknesses.

*Unbreakable* is in this context another story, it provides a new interpretation of obsessions with superheroes and superhero genre. With regard to the two predominant stances towards superheroes within the superhero

genre (ironic self-distance; realism and the richness of superhero's subjectivity), *Unbreakable* suggest the third position: total and uncompromised belief in superheroes which – at least from perspective of a movie – is considered a form of mental illness. This last stance is the only ethical one, more ethical then superheroes themselves are: it advocates complete fidelity to the genre regardless of its many flaws.

## Conclusion

To sum up, the humorous, self-ironic style of the first Superman comics and first Superman and Batman movies proves our thesis that the beginning of the genre already developed a self-reflection and self-knowledge. The humor and irony are signs and methods of acknowledgment that there is a certain difficulty with the main character and genre itself. An attempt of granting this hero an inner richness and depth of troubling personality is – as we stated – sign of regression of a genre and of a broader culture as well, while it suggests we should percieve a superhero as a realistic portrayal of subject's ordeals. Even more, the seeming psychological complexity of a superhero and his story tries to sell itself as a more convincing document of the truth (of subject and society). Only in a very stupid culture can we expect such a naive attitude towards a certain genre. And, to conclude, movie *Unbreakable* seems to provide us with another approach to the intrinsic problems of superhero genre. As we tried to prove, it shows an ethical stance towards a problematic genre and his problematic superhero.

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