

Haunted Knights in Spandex: Self and Othering in the Superhero Mythos*

Elastik Hayalet Şövalye: Süper Kahraman Söylencesinde Kendilik ve Ötekilik

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Abstract: This essay looks at the dynamics of self and the Other in superhero comics. The self-other dynamic in superhero mythos is an instance of the uncanny, which includes themes of doubling, ghostliness and a haunting that is the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, or the unfamiliar that partakes of the familiar. Superheroes are instances where the uncanny asserts itself between the self-other dichotomy. Second, I suggest, filiation (to do with the family and therefore the “home”) folds into affiliation, where affiliations build on, substitute for and supplant the familial. Third, the self of the superhero lies not in a sense of the self but in *selflessness*. I argue that it is the altruistic self that separates the superhero from the Other, the passive, spectator human. Fourth, I propose that superheroes present a certain utopian promise. I align the superhero with the posthuman (the technologically advanced humans of cybercultures), as signifying human *perfectibility*.

Keywords: Superheroes, comics, uncanny, transhumanism

Özet: Bu makalede süper kahraman çizgi romanlarında kendi ve öteki kavramlarının ilişkisini çalışmaktadır. Süper kahraman söylencesindeki kendi ve öteki ilişkisi özellikle esrarengiz olanın bir görünümüdür ve bu görünüm çoğaltma, hayalet basması gibi bilindik ve bilinmedik arasındaki tansiyonun sonucudur. Çoğu kez, bu durum bilinmedik olanın bilinenin yerini almasıyla görünür. Süper kahramanlar esrarengiz olanın kendi ve öteki arasındaki zıtlıkta yer edinir. İkinci olarak, aile ve yuvayla ilgili olanın ait olmamaya döndüğünü ve ait olmama durumunun da aile ve yuvayla ilgili olanın yerini aldığını iddia ediyorum. Üçüncü olarak, süper kahramanın kendiliği aslında kendiliğinde değil kendisizliğinde yatmaktadır ki, düşüncem süper kahramanı edilgen ve izleyici olan ötekinden ayıran şey onun özgeciliğidir. Dördüncü olarak da önerim süper kahramanın belirli bir ütöpik söz vermişlik sahibi olduğudur ki; bu da onun insan-sonrası denilebilecek siber-kültürel bir aşkın insan olması ve bu yönüyle insan mükemmelliğini temsil ettiğidir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Süper kahraman, çizgi roman, esrarengiz, trans-insanlık

The self-other dichotomy is complicated in very different ways in the superhero universe. All superheroes, it is assumed for the purposes of this essay, are manifestations of cultural anxieties and desires. When we read superhero books or watch their films we understand the problems of evidence, of justice and of legal processes. They help us understand the limitations of the law in altering the nature of justice. The law acquires both *cultural legibility* and *cultural legitimacy* when public narratives generate a particular popular perception of it. If “*cultural legibility*” is the narratological -representational- foundation of abstract notions of justice which partake of *social* systems of signification, and share a vocabulary and grammar of violations, claims, rights and intervention, “*cultural legitimacy*” is the *popular* acceptance of the norms, values and belief

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systems through the consumption of these narratives when the society embeds the norms in their own contexts. Popular perceptions of the law -whether of its majesty, corruption, inefficiency or inadequacy- enable the definition of the law itself. Writing about such popular perceptions of law realized through such cinematic representations – even fictional ones, Chase comments that popular perceptions [of the law] are constituent elements in the social process by which any legal culture becomes recognizable to its own participants (Chase, 2000, 559-560).

Popular culture is, in other words, the discursive terrain on which larger social issues are played out, often unobtrusively and masked as entertainment – and this is precisely why pop culture needs to be examined even more closely than clearly polemical or propagandist tracts.

That the superhero's self is schizophrenic with the secret identity masked, literally, by the needy, helpless and passive one is a truism I do not wish to rehearse here. Second, the superhero mythos has been subject to revisionism, especially from the 1980s (a starting date would be 1986 when Frank Miller published his *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* -the first work in the superhero comics genre that synthesizes 45 years of Batman history in one story arc- and Alan Moore published *Watchmen*). In the revisionist narrative the core myths of superheroism are called into question and the distinction between good and bad guys gets blurred, origin stories are redone and we are forced to examine the thematic of violence and sexuality (when, for instance, Miller portrays Batman and the *girl* Robin in a clinch in *TDKR*; see also Klock, 2002). Thus the identity of the superhero has itself undergone changes, even as new, problematic superheroes who do not fit the traditional pattern have emerged in texts like Marvels and the Kingdom Come series. Henry Jenkins therefore argues a case for treating the genre as presenting multiplicity rather than continuity where readers “consume multiple versions of the same franchise, each with different conceptions of the character, different understandings of their relationships with secondary figures, different moral perspectives, exploring different moments in their lives” (Jenkins, 2009, 20-21).

I want to move beyond the traditional reading of the superhero's secret identity into another set of ‘problems’. First, this essay makes a case for reading the self-other dynamic in superhero mythos as an instance of the uncanny. The uncanny first famously theorized by Freud and later elaborated in interesting ways by a wide variety of commentators (whose interest in spandex is, however, not known) such as Tzvetan Todorov, Samuel Weber, H el ene Cixous, Nicholas Royle and others, is about doubling, ghostliness and a haunting that is the tension between familiarity and the unfamiliar, or the unfamiliar that partakes of the familiar. Superheroes like Batman, I argue, are instances where the uncanny asserts itself between the self-other dichotomy. Second, one of the loci of the self-in-the-world, is relationships. In the superhero mythos, I suggest, filiation (to do with the family and therefore the “home” and the immediate relationships where the self is nurtured and socialized) folds into affiliation. Affiliations build on, substitute for and supplant the familial here and a new form of kinship and family, based on ideology and mutual support characterizes the superhero. Third, the self of the superhero lies not in a sense of the self but in *selflessness*. Embodying what superhero storywriters Jeph Loeb and Tom Morris have called “altruistic activism”, the superhero finds a self in a *work ethic* (“it is not what I am underneath, but what I do that defines me”, as Batman, rather pompously, pronounces in Christopher Nolan's 2005 film *Batman Begins*). I argue that it is the altruistic self that separates the superhero from the Other, the passive, spectator human. Fourth, I want to propose that superheroes present a certain utopian promise. They do not constitute an Other to the ordinary human but rather function as embodiments of a cultural desire for perfection. Here I align the superhero with the posthuman (the technologically advanced humans of cybercultures), as signifying human *perfectibility*. Thus the superhero is synecdochic of a utopian goal -faster, higher, better- of what we can *become*. S/he represents an *evolving* Self, a becoming rather than Being.

in the city. When he puts on the mask, he is the ugly truth the city must face: he is the ugly face of the city itself.

Our demons, Miller's Wayne pronounces in *TDKR*, can be defeated. But Wayne does not defeat his demons, as we know: he is unable to fall asleep and has frequent nightmares of the death of his parents. The foreign is the distant past, the undying past, which is kept alive so that Batman can also live. In other words, what I am proposing is that the uncanny is the haunting that generates the identity of Batman. Without his nightmares, his anxieties, and his haunting, there is no sense of self.

The uncanny shifts and doublings between, the surface and the interior, the self and the foreign, the human and the animal, the 'normal' and the insane constitutes the apparitional selfhood of Batman. Batman experiences himself as foreign when his origins trouble him. Wayne also experiences himself as Batman. More importantly, the self partakes of the Other resulting in an uncanny point where it becomes difficult to distinguish between Self and Other, Wayne and Batman. The epistemological uncertainty of the uncanny here is the apparitional nature of both Wayne and Batman. I do not see, as should be obvious, Batman as Wayne's secret self or alter ego or even double, I see Batman as constitutive of what Wayne is, just as Wayne embodies Batman.

I might also add that the revisionary narratives that introduce multiverses, parallel worlds and "hypertime" (Mark Waid's idea of interconnected parallel timelines that comprise all reality, first introduced in *The Kingdom*, 1998) and the famous Elseworlds (introduced by DC after the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series of 1985-86) also suggest the uncanny because these other worlds and actions that occur there seem to double the good versus evil battle that occurs on earth. Karin Kukkonen suggests that these counterfactual scenarios (of superhero multiverses) are "mutually incompatible realities" (Kukkonen, 2010, 41). However, Kukkonen's argument does not account for two crucial aspects of texts like *Crisis on Infinite Earths*: (i) the superhero remains essentially the same and (ii) the events unfolding in alternate universes replicate, uncannily, the events on earth, and the superhero continues to battle evil. Thus, even when the location shifts to someplace other than home (earth) there is a doubling. The uncanny, one recalls, is about places similar to but not quite home. This is precisely what we see in multiverse comic stories.

Altruistic Activism

Greg Smith has noted that most secret heroes are corporate professionals in their alter egos: Clark Kent (Superman) is a journalist, Matt Murdock (Daredevil) is a lawyer, Tony Stark (Iron Man) is an industrialist, Peter Parker (Spider-man) is a journalist, Barry Allen (Flash) and Ray Palmer (Atom) are scientists, and Bruce Wayne (Batman) spends a considerable amount of time with his Wayne industries and their Boards. Smith notes that all of them are professionals who fit into their corporate institutional worlds, and none are small-business people or day laborers. Thus, Smith argues, the Organization Man is central to the superhero's secret identity. The first works within the social rules, norms and networks, the latter often bypasses these (Smith, 2009, 127, 130). The official hero and the "outlaw" hero are combined into a single entity here.

Granted that the secret identity is enmeshed within the Organizational Man role Greg Smith has outlined, I propose that the superhero's self is based in large measure not on a sense of selfhood but on *selflessness*. Superman at one point even complains, in the midst of rescuing Lois Lane yet again: "I've a complaint! Rescuing you from scrapes takes up so much of my time, I've hardly time for anything else!" (Superman # 397-414, April 22 – May 11 1940: 67). Here Superman is drawing attention to the fact that his ministry must serve as many people as possible, and not just one. And of course, all superheroes insist that they need not be thanked for what they do. Mark Waid presciently notes that "in helping others, Superman helps himself ...

feels the greatest affinity (and something the Joker thrives on). The Joker constantly calls Batman's sanity into question: "*You had a bad day and everything changed. Why else would you dress up like a flying rat?*" (*The Killing Joke*). "*You can't kill me without becoming like me. I can't kill you without losing the only human being who can keep up with me. Isn't that ironic?*" asks the Joker (*Batman* # 663). In Nolan's *The Dark Knight* Batman, when offered assistance by his clones, retorts: "*I don't need help*", and Dr Jonathan Crane (who will become Scarecrow) responds: "*not my diagnosis*". In *Arkham Asylum* the Joker tells Batman: "*We want you in here with us in the madhouse where you belong*".

There is one more instance of the affiliation of the insane. Amadeus Arkham and Wayne/Batman have a lot in common. Arkham left Gotham and returned years later to bring order to the place by setting up the Arkham Asylum for the mentally ill. Both Arkham and Wayne are returned sons of Gotham. Both feel guilty about their parents: Arkham because he killed his mother and Wayne because he was responsible for their leaving the theatre and getting killed. And both see visions of a bat. Dr Cavendish forces Batman to read Arkham's journal in which he speaks of a bat and tells him: "*I'm not fooled by that cheap disguise. I know what you are*".

Conclusion: Superheroes, Transhumanism and the Culture of Perfectibility

Why would superheroes still be identified as human? I mean, why would "*creatures*" whose biological, psychological and social make-up situates them on the borders of the human be called "*superman*", "*Wonder Woman*", "*X-Men*" or "*Cat Woman*"? That they share characteristics of humans is obvious. What should be equally obvious is that they also exhibit characteristics, capabilities and propensities that cannot be identified as that of a "*normal*" human either. So to name them after "*man*" and "*woman*" is to ignore their ambiguous species -or racial- identity and draw them into the category of the human. Is it because their non-human aspects -strange powers, enhanced capabilities- become a source of anxiety that we have to humanize them? It is of course the consequence of a cultural anxiety that DC and Marvel ensure that superheroes serve the human race and not set about creating one of their own. By making the enhanced human a servitor, a trustee of the human race we not only ensure that the Other is incorporated into the larger project of humanity, but also that the threat of the superpowerful Other is alleviated. The Other is therefore not in an oppositional relationship with humans, but in a supportive role to the human projects of preserving life, wealth, property and the law.

I suggest that superheroes represent a, not necessarily a radically alien -Other- species or race. They rather represent, a culture of perfectibility of humans – more or less akin to the posthuman we see emerging in the 1990s (In the case of Superman, at least, there is no enhancement. In his "*human*" life he actually downgrades his qualities, whereas all other superheroes are humans who are enhanced – and this makes for an interesting paradox. I am grateful to Aniket Jaaware for pointing this out). The Other here is not alien but the embodiment of fantasy, of what we can ourselves evolve into. At this point I want to make a case for reading superheroes and their culture of perfectibility within the transhuman framework. I am in particular interested, in the anti-essentialist arguments made about species membership by transhumanist scholars such as Persson and Savulescu (2010). Transhumanists believe that technology can transcend the limitations of the human body and mind and therefore fetishize itself. But superheroes do possess technological prowess not necessarily of their own choice or making. Transhumanists believe in enhancement, some in a radical re-engineering of the human where the body can possess qualities no human has possessed before. Essentially enhancement takes a set of thus-far circumscribed human capabilities typical of the species (this is important) and expands/extends them (I am not debating the ethics of this enhancement vision. There is, of course, a key problem: somatic enhancement where I do something to my body so I can enjoy classical music better is radically different from gene line engineering where my future generations will also be "*modified*" for the

Given this ability to adopt norms, enhancing the ability to respond ethically is, again, in principle, possible. As Persson and Savulescu put it, “*without moral enhancement, other techniques of biomedical enhancement seem likely to increase global injustice*” because these would simply serve the cause of people in the developed world (2010, 667-8). “*With great power comes great responsibility*” would therefore mean that enhanced qualities imply enhanced altruism and sense of responsibility to take care of the distant other as well. Rather than kin altruism superpowers demand a xeno-altruism, resulting in a globalization of conscience. Indeed one commentator has described Batman as functioning as a “*moral exemplar*” to Robin (Nielsen).

Objections to transhumanist enhancement by thinkers like Francis Fukuyama involve the binary between “*natural*” humans and “*synthetic*” humans. Transhumanists do not see any human quality as immutable or sacrosanct. I propose that the range of abilities embodied in superheroes represents not simply a binary of “*ordinary human*” versus “*advanced human*” but a spectra of variation *among* humans. There is, already, considerable variation within the species (in fact contemporary theories in disability studies call us to see differently-abled people not as possessing a “*lack*” but as *variants* of the human model) – and this is all the more reason to think of ur-humans or posthumans, or superheroes, as one more variant of *homo sapiens*. It remains, undoubtedly, for humans to debate and act responsibly on the choice, degree and nature of enhancement that adds to this variety (There is within the transhumanist vision a black hole. There is little to suggest that they see posthumans as merely being a variation on/of the available human model. Instead there is a feeling one gets that they posit posthumans as desirable and reject those they see as “*lacking*” these enhancements. This might lead to a new form of genetic racism where the unenhanced life is not worth living. There is an urgent need, I think, to think of *species* improvement itself, where enhancements should be entitlements for everyone, like universal human rights).

Superheroes, I conclude, represent the minoritarian Other in a social order given to the tyranny of the majority in so-called democracy. Second we need to see superheroes as variants on the human theme. They represent the perfectible human, a fantasy that drives us to perform better.

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