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Political Trends in Comic Books and the Notion of a Superhero in Present America

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Streszczenie

„Wątki polityczne w komiksie oraz pojęcie superbohatera we współczesnej Ameryce”.

Praca poświęcona jest wątkom politycznym w komiksie amerykańskim. Pierwsza część skupia się na przybliżeniu pojęć polityki oraz sprawiedliwości, jak i na omówieniu cech komiksu. Analizie została poddana nowela graficzna „Watchmen,” w której autor przedstawia amerykańskich superbohaterów w pejoratywnym świetle. Praca przedstawia w jaki sposób wątki polityczne zostają ukazane w komiksie amerykańskim, a także jak sam komiks przenika do sfery społecznej. W końcowej części zostaje podjęta próba analizy obecnego zapatrywania się na pojęcie superbohatera w społeczeństwie amerykańskim.

Słowa kluczowe

polityka, sprawiedliwość, superbohater, komiks amerykański, media, prezydent

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Introduction

Comic books have been a part of American popular culture since they started to appear in the form of short strips in the newspapers.¹ Nowadays, they vary in form and themes but they resemble the society and the authors' thoughts on a number of issues connected to the present day policies.

Comics deal with two major communicating devices, words and images. Admittedly this is an arbitrary separation. But, since in the modern world of communication they are treated as independent disciplines it seems valid. Actually, they are derivatives of a single origin and in the skillful employment of words and images lies the expressive potential of the medium.²

The potential of comic books is being discussed in this thesis in terms of providing the subtext concerning political and cultural context. The short history of this medium is presented in order to introduce the superhero genre. The thesis questions politics starting with the discussion of the very meaning of the term. It traces the notion of justice, as it is an inherent aspect of the superhero genre, hence it focuses on the philosophical approach to the idea. Moreover, the attention is paid to the very form of comic books as print media with a view to pinpointing their potential. The changes that these pieces of art went through in the 1960s are presented so that the reader will be aware of the attention that has been paid to these works.

The thesis explores the political trends in comic books concentrating on *Watchmen* by Alan Moore, yet, it includes examination of a number of American comic books in order to point out the political and cultural issues they concern. Analysis of *Watchmen* is to help to discuss the politics of heroes, leadership, and morality in American culture as well as to comment on the superhero genre. Documents and journals used in this part of the paper are to serve as a proof that the situations described by Moore

¹ Ian Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 20.

² Will Eisner, *Comics & Sequential Art* (Tamarac: Poorhouse Press, 1985), 13.

in his fiction are the reflections of real life incidents. The other examples of the comic books and graphic novels are to draw attention to the fact that a great variety of political subtext is being provided in different kind of comics.

Finally, a close look will be given to some fictional characters who have become a part of American culture as well as to the way they are received by the society. In order to examine the public feeling concerning this issue a proper research will be summarized. Furthermore, the thesis traces the images of superheroes in political life of contemporary America and it attempts to prove that not only are political trends included in comic books, but also that politics itself may take advantage of comic book characters. In order to do so, a number of examples from Barack Obama's presidential campaigns will be provided. The thesis ends with the discussion of current views concerning the notion of a hero in present America.

Chapter I

Politics, justice, and superpowers

1.1. Questioning politics

In today's world everyday people are confronted with yet another news item concerning politics. Not only are domestic affairs discussed in the media but also everybody may come across information on foreign policies. But what does *politics* actually mean? Is it only what is happening in the government or is everything that we are exposed to that embodies the very term *politics*? One of the most recognizable English playwrights William Shakespeare made of politics the main theme of his works. The reason why the dramatist used it as an important part of his works is the fact that he had noticed a spectacle in it, as Robert Krasowski, in the article concerning nowadays' conflicts between politicians, suggests. In Shakespeare's dramas, what are emphasized are the human nature and the struggle for the power. That is why the author describes the politics and rulers as people fighting for their own good, not the citizens'.³ Krasowski claims that there is not much that has changed since the days when Shakespeare created his dramas. In the article he tries to explain why he believes that politics is still mainly the fight for the power only.⁴ Nevertheless, the term *politics*, as a variety of dictionaries state, is not synonymous to the struggle for ruling in a country, but it embodies much more meanings.

The expression is ambiguous, Fred M. Frohock points out that "the range of things describable by the word 'politics' is vast and uneven,"⁵ yet, it is evident that there is no one definition of this term. American terminology proposes a variety of descriptions, for instance, *American Heritage Dictionary* translates it as "the art or science of government

³ Robert Krasowski, "Sztuka rządzenia według Szekspira," in *Polityka* (51-52, 2012, 2013), 27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵ Fred M. Frohock, "The Structure of 'Politics,'" in *American Political Science Review*, vol. 72 no. 3 (September, 1978), 865. Accessed: January 2, 2013, stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1955107>.

(and) the practice or profession of conducting political affairs”⁶ whereas *Oxford Advanced American Dictionary* says that politics are “the activities involved in getting and using power in public life, and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society”.⁷ These two definitions conclude that there is not enough to get into the power, as in the Shakespeare’s dramas, but when holding the important position in a county use it for other people. Stephen D. Tansey elaborates on what *politics* means examining descriptions provided by different authors and dictionaries. He sums up that dictionaries’ explanations put emphasis on the state, whereas definitions provided by the political scientists focus on executing powers by either the whole societies or individuals.⁸ This, again, proves that there is no exact definition of *politics* but trying to be more precise in defining the term, one can look at the etymology of the word. *Online Etymology Dictionary* states that from the 1520s the word *politics* meant “science of government.” It derives from Aristotle’s *ta politika* meaning “affairs of state” which appears in the philosopher’s book on governing.⁹

Aristotle’s *Politics* focuses in its eight parts on the issues connected to the state, such as institution of family, government and constitution. The title suggests that the text concerns issues connected to *polis*, which was a city-state in Greece.¹⁰ The author observes that people are born with the ability to participate in the political life, they are “political animals.”¹¹ They want to live together hence the author gives examples of different forms of governing in order to choose the most beneficial. Aristotle claims that family and city are natural institutions in which the latter plays the role of a tutor.¹² In

⁶ *The American Heritage Dictionary of English Language*, accessed December 20, 2012, stable URL: <http://ahdictionary.com/>

⁷ *Oxford Advanced American Dictionary*, accessed December 20, 2012, stable URL: <http://oaadonline.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>

⁸ Stephen D. Tansey and Nigel Jackson, *Politics: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 5.

⁹ *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed: January 11, 2013, stable URL: <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=politics>.

¹⁰ Munroe Eagles, *Politics: An Introduction to Democratic Government*, (Canada: Broadview Press, 2008), 82.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), 59.

¹² Józef Bocheński, *Zarys Historii Filozofii* (Kraków: Philed, 1993) , 67.

Politics, from the very beginning, the author puts emphasis on the fact that the most important is to aspire by all individuals to gain the joint good of the whole. He underlines that people forming cities and acting for the benefit of it are in fact political society.¹³ Aristotle claims that the society is composed of individuals who are not equal but as a whole they contribute to one group. Hence, it is evident that politics cannot exist alone but it is embodied in the culture of the countries and every single citizen.

Even if Aristotle lived in 384-322 BC¹⁴ political scientists still see in his *Politics* valuable source in discussing modern ideas on governing. In *Aristotle's Politics Today* the authors prove that the philosopher's description of practical politics is still significant. They enumerate Aristotle's concepts which may be helpful in the work of a modern politician. Among a number of them the attention is paid to the idea of changing one's political views whenever it feels best to do so. This is described in a pejorative way as destabilizing, and therefore should be avoided. The same pattern of avoidance that Evan and Goodman find relevant in today's world concerns extremes that a person who is connected to politics might go to. Aristotle warns against utopianism as well as pragmatism whereas the authors of *Aristotle's Politics Today* notice that today's political parties often go too much on one side having some radical views. They do not make alliances with a bigger party who shares some of their beliefs but rather they try to exaggerate their opinion, going even more into extreme.¹⁵ It might be seen as paying too much attention on one's views than on the good of the citizens.

Murray and Edelman claim that if politics is created by men it has to be the view of the needs of people living in a state. Nevertheless, the authors observe that the meaning of the word changes according to what it refers to – due to the fact that it may refer to

¹³ Aristotle, 13.

¹⁴ Bocheński, 56-57.

¹⁵ *Aristotle's Politics Today*, ed. Lenn Evan Goodman and Robert B. Talisse (New York: State University of New York Press, Albany, 2008), 30.

either individuals or interest groups. What is more, what one assumes about a particular political organization may actually not be the reflection of the real work of it.¹⁶ Hence, a group which is called political by some would not be seen like this by others. This is when people follow a particular notion just because of the tradition, and do not think if it really reflects their beliefs. They associate politics with the pictures presented in the media rather than with its real work. Murray and Edelman believe that people's participation in politics, such as in the form of voting, is rather symbolic than meaningful. The government is seen as a symbol therefore taking part in political rituals is mechanic. Nevertheless, it involves the masses emotionally.¹⁷ Among the whole citizens of a country there are always people who want to actively participate in the work of government and forming laws. Some are guided by their common sense and want to share their knowledge in order to make their country a better place, others just wish to be recognized and they seek for money. Hence, it is not an easy task to choose appropriate political leaders who would take care of the variety of issues concerning the country as in fact, it is evident that nowadays everything might be connected to politics.

Political scientists discuss the adjective *political* as it has become widely used when talking about different kinds of things, as Eugene F. Miller suggests. One may use the adjective in terms of government and business while others will use it when talking about church or school.¹⁸ Hence, when describing politics, definitions often concentrate on the issue of *power*. Eagles in *Politics: An Introduction to Democratic Government* comes up with a detailed meaning of politics: "Politics concerns the formulation and execution of decisions that are binding upon the population of a society and the relationship between those who make or implement such decisions and those who are

¹⁶ Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 2-3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4-17.

¹⁸ Eugene F. Miller, "What Does 'Political' Mean?" in *The Review of Politics* Vol. 42, No. 1 (Jan., 1980), 56-72. Accessed January 11, 2013. stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1407148>.

affected by them.”¹⁹ The definition expresses the idea that the very existence of power or the body that would execute this power does not explain politics.²⁰ The term includes all bodies that are affected by the decisions made in a country. That is why politics concerns not only people who rule the country as in Shakespearian stories but also the citizens. And since the whole society is involved in politics, increasing interrelation between those two is observed. Therefore *politics* is based on communication between the politicians and the society.

It becomes clear that since politics concerns every citizen, there should be a set of rules to be followed by people. Different institutions have to obey the rules of the state and there are authorities established to watchdog a particular citizen or organization. The system should be characterized by a set of clear rules designed by men, and for men. Forming such rules is possible when taking into consideration what is the best for an ordinary citizen, and therefore just, in order to be obeyed by the society.

1.2. The notion of justice

Aristotle believed that just society enables people to live the good life, and participate in politics, as it is one of the good life’s essentials.²¹ However, coming up with the explanation of what is just is undeniably a difficult task. People are not equal, they come from all types of backgrounds, have different education, and believe in a number of values. That is why ideas on a system that would be described by justice have been discussed by many philosophers and political thinkers since the first civilizations were born.

¹⁹ Eagles, 20.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Aristotle, 63.

The concept is based on fairness, as James Konow suggests in his article analyzing different theories of justice.²² He claims that one general theory would guide some other, more specific theories, but having so many theories proposed by a variety of philosophers enables people to have different perspectives on that issue.²³ What is just for one person would seem unfair to the other, moreover, the problem gets more confusing when taking into consideration individuals coming from different parts of the world, not sharing the same history and culture. Hence, reasonable seems to be basing the notion of justice on a hypothetical person knowing nothing about oneself. One of the leading political philosophers, John Rawls, came up with his work on justice that is described as one of the dominant when it comes to political philosophy.²⁴

In *A Theory of Justice* John Rawls proposes the idea of developing a social contract through the concept of justice, as according to him, a good society is based on just principles. His aim is “to present a conception of justice which generalizes and carries to a higher level of abstraction the familiar theory of the social contract as found, say, in Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. (...) The guiding idea is that the principles of justice (...) are the principles that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality”.²⁵ Rawls describes an individual who stands in an *original position*²⁶ behind a *veil of ignorance*.²⁷ He believes that one should know nothing about his or her race, nationality, religion, or sex when creating fair rules for the society. Such position would allow a person to choose a just system, due to the fact, that nobody would like to suffer ending up in the worse situation than others. The principles would be fair because the one who sets them would not be sure whether he or she would suffer or

²², James Konow, "Which Is the Fairest One of All? A Positive Analysis of Justice Theories" in *Journal of Economic Literature* (XLI, December 2003), 1188.

²³ Ibid., 1190.

²⁴ *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, "Rawls, John," ed. by Robert Audi (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 774-775.

²⁵ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 11.

²⁶ Ibid., 12.

²⁷ Ibid.

benefit from them. Rawls claims that from the *original position*, and behind the *veil of ignorance*, the individual would establish a society that would be based on fair rules. The first one concerns equal rights to basic liberties,²⁸ whereas the other one assures that those who are less advantaged in the society would be provided with what is the best for them.²⁹ Since the idea is that people should not know anything about themselves when establishing social contract, the terms of that cooperation would be motivated by self-interest. That is why citizens would agree to only what would be with the advantage to the poorest class in the society because eventually they might end up in this disadvantaged situation. Hence, one might see that Rawls makes it clear that social and economic inequalities will exist in the world,³⁰ even in the one based on just principles. The principles state that everyone should be given equal opportunities, but at the same time equal distribution of goods among people is rejected.

The concept of *justice as fairness*,³¹ as it is named, seems to be reasonable, but even his author was aware of some problems that it may produce. John Rawls admits limitations in some areas of his theory. According to him, the theory may be extended³² as when it comes to the principles on which it is based “there are surely circumstances in which they fail.”³³ It may suggest that some supplementation to the theory is actually required. John Rawls’s student, Martha Nussbaum, admits in her *Frontiers of Justice*, that the social contract theory of her teacher is the strongest one in the Western tradition of political philosophy.³⁴ In the book she focuses on the issues that Rawls left unexamined, and which are so serious that she is certain that they cannot be solved by classical theory of justice. According to Nussbaum John Rawls saw the purpose of cooperation as mutual

²⁸ Ibid., 60.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 61.

³¹ Ibid., 3.

³² Ibid., 17.

³³ Ibid., 63.

³⁴ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice. Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 24.

benefit based on each person's self-interest. Yet, citizens who are disabled or live in the nations that are not fully developed cannot be components of social contract. She discusses also justice in terms of animals. *Justice as fairness* provides fair rules to humans who are more or less the same when it comes to mental and physical powers, however, it leaves weaker ones and non-humans out.³⁵

Non-humans described by Nussbaum refer to animals however when thinking about justice in a fictionalized world, where creatures with superpowers exist, the notion of justice should be rethought since supermen are more powerful than ordinary humans. In fact, most of the early American superhero comic books present those with special abilities as the defenders of justice in the society. They are heroes who stand in the name of law and help the government to fight crime. It seems interesting that the philosophers mentioned in this chapter who are known all over the world for their works on justice are Jewish the same as all the most important figures connected to the beginning of the comic book industry.³⁶ It has been observed that the first stories presented superheroes fighting with the fictional enemies were designed by Jewish writers, and what is more, the storylines seem to resemble Jewish history. When taking into consideration Superman, Arie Kaplan suggests that the plot has some Jewish concepts, such as Superman's coming to Earth is translated as Moses' coming in the basket, and his living in a secret that he is not one of the people might be viewed as hiding one's religion during Holocaust.³⁷ The Superman never reveals his faith but there has been a number of works trying to find Jewish concepts in it. Moreover, with the beginning of the era of the caped characters and their involvement in the World War Two and the struggle against Nazis, other characters also having Jewish authors have been investigated in order to find Jewish concepts.³⁸

³⁵ Ibid., 16.

³⁶ Harvey Pekar, Foreword to *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* by Arie Kaplan (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2008), x.

³⁷ Arie Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 13.

³⁸ Ibid., 173.

However, before the superhero era began, comic books publishers had to deal with the set of rules regulating the whole process of publishing.³⁹ It turned out that the sequential art, which had remained underestimated before, may serve as an influential medium.

1.3. The print media: comic books

The significance of print media is observed around the world. Even if nowadays people use mostly electronic devices, the printed information in books, newspapers, or brochures, is still available and significant.⁴⁰ The popularity and need of a certain type of themes included in the works, and the type of medium depend on a variety of factors. When taking into consideration literature, there are countries, like the Philippines, where graphic novels and comic books are more popular among the nation than novels.⁴¹ Even if comics are considered by many as something to entertain children, the fact is that they have been designed for different kind of audience. Many Polish bookstores offer comic books which are usually to be found close to the children literature section, hence, it is not rare to find for instance graphic novels talking about sexuality close to the works for youngsters. Topics concerning adult topics, such as history and politics, are to be found in a variety of comic books and graphic novels. Nevertheless, there was not always the way it is now. Censorship played a huge role in the American comic book industry.

In the countries such as China there are institutions aimed at surveying different media in order to make sure that what is being printed or broadcasted is political correct. Recent situation concerning 2013 New Year's wishes in the *Southern Weekly* confirms that politics control the media. Instead of wishing the readers coming true of the dreams

³⁹ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 103.

⁴⁰ *Handbook of Print Media: Technologies and Production Methods*, ed. Helmut Kipphan (New York: Springer, 2001), 4.

⁴¹ Shirrel Rhoades, *Comic Books: How the Industry Works* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2008), 5.

about political reforms, the newspaper had to print a hymn in praise of the communist party.⁴² Politics control what is communicated through the media so that issues to which people are exposed to are chosen by the ones in power. Even in the United States some private owned media are said to be maintained by certain political elites.⁴³

The media's power may change one's attitude towards issues that are rooted deep in the culture. When being exposed to an image that presents not stereotypical situation, the viewers might change their opinion on a particular issue. Scott McCloud notices a huge impact of the images on the humans throughout the centuries. These presented in sequence serves as a tool for communicative purposes.⁴⁴ In order to achieve the effectiveness in storytelling the author of the comic book has to coordinate the narrative and page layout. For instance, in the scenes implying sudden movements artists may divide the page into narrow vertical panels. Following Scott McCloud's terminology these certain panels form combinations of words and images among which he distinguishes seven major types.⁴⁵ He notices that the texts might say precisely what is going on in the picture, or on the other hand the speech bubbles can be omitted leaving the image only. Hence, the panel in the form of a picture may send the message itself or with the use of the words forming *duo-specific*⁴⁶ combination. Texts may add a lot to the pictures, for instance elaborating on what takes place in the picture, or on the contrary they may be totally separated from each other forming *parallel*⁴⁷ combination. If the text is incorporated within the image, the author uses *montage*.⁴⁸

⁴² Jędrzej Winiecki, "Smok i jego krab" in *Polityka* (No.3, 2013), 52.

⁴³ John Ryan and William M. Wentworth, *Media and Society: The Production of Culture in the Mass Media* (Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon, 1999), 69.

⁴⁴ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1996), 20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 153-155.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Another aspect that is crucial to McCloud is the very transition between the panels in which he divides six types.⁴⁹ He starts with moment-to-moment⁵⁰ category which describes panels between which not much changes. McCloud continues with the transitions where action, subject, or scenes are the most important.⁵¹ He ends the division with panels falling into aspect-to-aspect⁵² category, which shows distinct ideas, and non-sequitur⁵³ one in which it is impossible to find logical relationship that the panel would have. Even if the sequence of the panels in the story seems to be not unusual, there always can be something that will hinder the logical order. For instance, these might be the drawings, and colors used by the artist that would disturb the feeling of security in the reader. Moreover, the mystery behind the scene can be emphasized by the gutter,⁵⁴ which is the space between the panels. For instance the panel may fall apart, leaving the bottom gutter unusually large which may imply sudden stop of the action. Some comic books may present only parts of the whole view, yet depending on the *closure*⁵⁵ one is able to read these panels as meaningful. When the narrative and artistic tools used in the comic book form coherent body, the audience grows. As with any other cultural phenomenon, also on reading comic books researches have been conducted.

The earliest investigation on heavy viewing found that youngsters who watched violent TV programs were more prone to violent behavior towards their colleagues.⁵⁶ With the growth of television more researches on that matter were conducted agreeing on the harmful effects that being exposed to violence has. These concerns were the topic of

⁴⁹ Ibid., 70-72.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 70.

⁵¹ Ibid., 70-71.

⁵² Ibid. 72.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 66.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁶*The Dynamics of Mass Communication*, 506- 507.

Senator Estes Kefauver's speeches in 1952.⁵⁷ Some of them put emphasis on the juvenile delinquency caused by violent pictures in comic books.

1.4. Political and cultural changes of the 1960s as the beginning of the Superhero Era

In the mid-1950s every comic book published in the United States of America had to be labeled with a piece of information concerning approval for publishing.⁵⁸ The small stamp printed in one of the corners of the comic book volume did not change much in the perception of readers, but it started the process of alteration in the entire comic book industry. The sign carried the message that a particular publication was free from brutality, sex, and inappropriate language, according to the norms provided by a Comics Magazine Association of America in the 1954. The regulations were a response to the accusations made against the content of the comic books in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. Comic books were seen by many politicians, psychiatrists, and scholars as the cause of the juvenile delinquency at that time.⁵⁹ The reason for this idea came from the visible circumstances that the most popular among youngsters were comic volumes on terrifying topics. The growing interest of the scary tales doubled sales of comic books in the 1940s.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, it became evident that in the face of the controversies over crime and horror stories, the Comics Magazine Association of America had to deal with the public outcry. Comic book industry was in its growth in the early 1950s but it was soon to be ended, due to the impact that imposing the restrictions had on the publishers.⁶¹

In the late 1940s the comic book industry was flourishing after over forty years

⁵⁷ Ibid., 532.

⁵⁸ Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: the History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), vii.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 1-2.

⁶⁰ Gordon, 139.

⁶¹ Wright, 89.

since the first illustrated humor magazine had appeared in the United States of America.⁶² At that time the comic strips were printed mostly in newspapers, designed for the advertising reasons, and gained the audience. Nevertheless, comic strips soon started to be exchanged with the more popular comic volumes, which main aim was to gain the interest of younger readers.⁶³ Due to the fact that comic books were available almost in every kind of public places, for instance small shops, they were easy to access by children and teenagers. Youngsters have always been interested in everything what is colorful and full of pictures, that is why in the 1940s it was very convenient for them to have their favorite pieces of writing easily accessible. Moreover, the nature of a young person leads to the exploration of what is forbidden, new, or even frightening. Youngster's imagination is very complex and that is one of the reasons why they seek for mysterious adventures that are not related to the reality they live in. Hence, in the late 1940s the most popular among children and teenagers, and what follows, the most profitable for the publishers started to be crime comic books, with their bloody pictures and terrifying plots.⁶⁴ New titles of the mysterious comics appeared, and the interest of the consumers did not decline. The audience wanted to read new stories and feel even more frightened. That is the reason why in 1949, comic book publishers such as EC, Marvel, Atlas, or Timely started to change their crime comics into horror ones with scarier plots and horrifying drawings.⁶⁵

This change in the plot of the comic books brought many questions and doubts among the parents whose children were reading horror volumes. In the 1940s and the 1950s Americans were flooded with the articles and booklets such as *Are Comics Bad for Children?*, *The Effects of the Comic Books on the Ideology of Children*, or *Comics Are No*

⁶² Gordon, 15.

⁶³ Wright, xiv.

⁶⁴ Amy Kiste Nyberg, "Comic Book Censorship in the United States," in *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-comics Campaign*, ed. John A. Lent (London: Associated University Press, 1999), 42.

⁶⁵ David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 54.

Longer Comic.⁶⁶ Critics of comic books claimed that reading them had bad influence on academic skills, and social sphere of young people lives. However, there were also people, who defended comic books, for instance in *Journal of Experiment Education* it was pointed out that after the comparison of the readers of comic books of different kind, there was no evidence that the content was harmful for its audience.⁶⁷ It was proved there as well that these of the examined children who read more comic books, were also interested in being familiar with publications of a more sophisticated type. Controversies were growing, and the atmosphere among the publishers and critics became tense.

This debate continued with more visible effects after the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. The book was written by psychiatrist, Dr. Frederick Wertham, who claimed that comic books had bad impact on youngsters.⁶⁸ He stated that the content of crime and horror volumes was harmful to the young audience, and that it leads to juvenile delinquency. The psychiatrist's claims became very popular, which is the reason why Dr. Wertham had many followers. Comic books were not negated only because of their plots and drawings, which were seen as the significant contribution to the juvenile delinquency, but they were also viewed as harmful for children's eyesight.⁶⁹ This kind of attitude reveals that most of the critics were exaggerating the harmful effects of reading the comic books by youngsters. Nevertheless, even if the research did not prove what was claimed by Dr. Wertham and other critics, the negative approach towards the comic books continued.⁷⁰

Dr. Wertham was certain that depicting a crime in the comic book would be the cause of ones illegal behavior, but the opponents claimed that more research on that issue

⁶⁶ John A. Lent, "The Comics Debates Internationally: Their Genesis, Issues, and Commonalities," in *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-comics Campaign*, ed. John A. Lent (London: Associated University Press, 1999), 11.

⁶⁷ Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 10.

⁶⁸ Gordon, 2.

⁶⁹ Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 11.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

should be conducted.⁷¹ Nevertheless, the general attitude of the American parents towards Dr. Wertham's postulates was that he was right in his arguments, and that is the reason why the public followed his ideas. Not without the significance is the fact that, in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, Americans were exposed to the terrifying pieces of news in the newspapers and magazines such as *Newsweek* or *Times* concerning the bad influence that the plot of the comic books had on the young readers. Among the headlines there were for instance: "[a] six-year old boy wrapped himself in a sheet and jumped from a rafter after seeing it done in a comic book; a fourteen-year-old poisoned a fifty-year-old woman after getting the idea and the poison recipe from a comic book."⁷² It was clear for the parents that they should not let their children read comic books or, what was more reasonable, that publishers should change the way they are depicting crime stories. That was their answer to the postulate concerning the need of having censorship that Dr. Wertham stated in *Seduction of the Innocent*: "What is censorship? The industry has obscured that by claiming that the publisher exercises a censorship over himself. That is not what censorship means. It means control of one agency by another. When Freud speaks of an internal censor in the human mind, he does not mean that instinctive behavior can control itself. He specifically postulates another agency, the superego, which functions as a sensor. Comic books for children have no censorship."⁷³ Due to the growing controversies and numerous legal cases regarding comic books in the early 1950s, publishers decided to formulate self-censoring body.⁷⁴

The Comics Magazine Association of America, Inc. was an organization found voluntarily in September 1954 by over eighty-five percent of the United States' publishers of the comic books.⁷⁵ Self-regulation was based on a Comic Code that was adopted to

⁷¹ „Crime comics and the Constitution,” *Stanford Law Review* 2/7 (1955): 250, accessed: September 15, 2012, stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/pss/1226392>, accessed October 13, 2011.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 251.

⁷³ Frederic Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Amereon Ltd, 1996), 170.

⁷⁴ Hajdu, 67.

⁷⁵ Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, vii-viii.

prohibit the subjects that had been widely discussed in the courts. It was obligatory for the publishers who joined the Association to submit all the comic strips to Judge Murphy who with his staff were to decide whether the content was appropriate to be published, or if the Code was violated. That was the standard procedure of the censorship which led to the lengthening the process of publishing a single volume, since in the majority of the cases, the piece of work had to be corrected.⁷⁶

The Comic Code of 1954 is a much extended version of a Comic Code of 1948 that was designed by the Association of Comics Magazines Publishers, Inc. The regulations of 1954 are divided into seven separated parts.⁷⁷ The Code begins with the explanation why it was formed, giving the willingness to keep the comics “in standards of a good taste” as the main reason. First three sections describe general rules over which a comic volume should be designed. It was obvious for the publishers, that if they wanted their pieces of work to be published they were not allowed, for instance, to put the words such as “horror” or “crime” in the titles, and when using “crime” they were to remember not to make it more visible than any other word in the headlines. It meant that there would no longer be possible to find the covers with bloody-like captions telling the reader that the story was a horror one. What is more, unusual ways of using weapons, and depicting brutal scenes were forbidden.⁷⁸

In the second of its part, the Comic Code of 1954 informs about the general rules concerning the presentation of religion, conversations, relationships, advertising and nudity.⁷⁹ These were the restrictions that changed the general theme of the stories used in comic books since the 1940s. The publishers were not allowed, for instance to show in the

⁷⁶ “Crime Comics and the Constitution,” 254.

⁷⁷ “Comic Book Code of 1954,” in *Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency. Interim Report*, ed. Senate Committee on the Judiciary (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1955), 35-36.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

volumes any humorous examples of divorced couples.⁸⁰ That is why the first issue of *Panic* magazine, which was part of the EC Comics, was banned in Massachusetts two months after the Comic Code had been formulated.⁸¹ The volume consisted of four stories. One of the authors was William Elder whose *The Night Before Christmas* was the cause of banning the whole volume. In the story, Santa Clause is a happy and funny person, but his sleigh is depicted with the caption “just divorced.” This humorous way of presenting divorced status was against the Code, and that was enough to take the comic book out of sale.⁸² It shows how harmful it was for the publishers not to obey the rules provided by the Comics Magazine Association of America.

David Hajdu in his *Ten-Cent Plague* elicits a number of other examples regarding the restriction of the Comic Code by the Comics Magazine Association of America. He interviews many comic book writers and artists who claim that in the 1950s their job started to be frustrating. They had to change their ideas into the ones that they were not fully satisfied with. Hajdu retells the story of EC Comics’ editor, who always submitted the comics to be printed to the Comic Magazine Association of America himself. In 1956 he got the volume of *Incredible Science-Fiction* back without the approval for publishing. Because of the fact that the deadline of printing the comic books was coming, EC Comics decided to reprint one of the stories from 1952.⁸³ Nevertheless, the comic had to be submitted to the Comics Magazine Association of America for the verification, because it had been issued before the implementation of the Comic Code.

In the 1950s Supreme Court had to deal with many cases in which prosecutors stated to “restrict the sale and distribution of crime comics.”⁸⁴ One of the companies that survived the wave of aggressive charges was Marvel Comics. However, it was only

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Brian Hughes, *Again With the Comics*, “A Christmas Panic”, accessed: September 15, 2012, stable URL: <http://www.againwiththecomics.com/2009/12/christmas-panic.html>.

⁸² Hajdu, 234.

⁸³ Ibid., 235.

⁸⁴ “Crime Comics and the Constitution,” 260.

because its former publisher, Martin Goodman, owned his own distribution company. Nevertheless, Marvel Comics' sales were diminishing.⁸⁵ Because of the strict rules imposed by the Comics Magazine Association of America, comic industry had to transform, in order to gain the readers. Due to the fact that the most profitable stories were forbidden, those few comic book artists who did not resign from their jobs had to come up with new ideas. That is how the era of a superhero in the comic industry began.⁸⁶ The Comic Code was still valid, and the discussions over the comic books continued, but it was easier to obey the strict rules with the new type of stories.

In the 1960s Americans became doubtful when it comes to authorities and their respect towards them decreased. That is why even the superhero comic books changed considerably. The titles highlighted the fact that even the characters question their existence and actions. They asked 'why' and even 'if' they are needed.⁸⁷ The internal affairs discussed by the Americans, like the one of sending soldiers to Vietnam, in the middle of the 1960s became important also for the plots of the comic books. Letters sent to the publishers either encouraged or discouraged them to send a particular character to Vietnam. Stan Lee, Marvel's editor, admitted that soon it became a debate over the question whether the war is needed or not, and the plot of the stories was less important. Nevertheless, Lee decided that Captain America would not be sent to Vietnam.⁸⁸ The plots of the superhero comic books differed but the very idea of a powerful human-like creature was similar in the majority of the storylines.

The first comic superheroes share some distinct features. First, and the most important, is the fact that they are more powerful than an ordinary human. "I teach you the overman"⁸⁹ says Zarathustra in the *Prologue of Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche, in

⁸⁵ Wright, 201.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 203.

⁸⁷ Wright, 241.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 242.

⁸⁹ Frederich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, ed. Adrian Del Caro and Robert Pippin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5.

his philosophical novel, introduces the readers to the concept of a man whose role is to try being a better creature than a human: “what the human shall be to the overman: a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment.”⁹⁰ However, the comic *overman*’s power is given at birth, or gained, but not taught. Richard Reynolds in his book on superheroes elicits features of a typical comic book superhero. He observes that in general the parents are excluded from the stories. The character becomes man-god creature fighting for justice usually without revealing his or her true identity. Even if the superheroes can easily take control over the world, they are loyal to the country. Moreover, the stories use science as a magical form. Difficult scientific concepts coexist with the supernatural powers.⁹¹ What also distinguishes a superhero from an ordinary citizen is the disguise.

The costume not only is a thing to hide behind, or to distinguish the superhero from others, but also it shows the individuality of the character.⁹² Among the American comic books’ superheroes there is also the distinction between those wearing a mask, and the ones who do not, but they are still unrecognizable. When the character is wearing these attributes his name changes and he or she acquires his new identity. The costume changes everything and marks the time when superpowers are about to use. Reynolds notices that the costume is not just a disguise but when it changes during the story it is an indication of the character’s development.⁹³

The characters who change their outfits throughout the story are the *Watchmen*’s heroes. Their disguises differ within the years as they participate in a variety of actions but also because their characters develop. The story written by Alan Moore presents superheroes that first appeared in New York between the 1940s and the 1960s⁹⁴ when in reality the characters with superpowers started to appear in a great number in the comic

⁹⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁹¹ Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1992), 16.

⁹² Ibid., 26.

⁹³ Ibid., 29.

⁹⁴ Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 2005, originally published in single magazine form as *Watchmen* 1-12, 1986, 1987).

books.⁹⁵ This twelve-issue story was first published between 1986 and 1987 before coming out in the reprinted full-pack version. Even if *Watchmen's* characters are superheroes they differ from their predecessors considerably.

Chapter II

***Watchmen* and the fight for a better world**

2.1. New type of a superhero

The author of *Watchmen* is aware of the innovative expression of his work: “What I’d seen *Watchmen* as being was something radically different that was taking lots of chances and trying to do something that had never been done before.”⁹⁶ The story was first published as separate twelve issues that amazed with their form. The last pages of each

⁹⁵ Kaplan, 36.

⁹⁶ George A. Khoury, *The Extraordinary Work by Alan Moore* (Raleigh: TwoMorrrows Publishing, 2003), 120.

issue are pieces of narrative that extends the main story. There is also a comic book within the comic which continues throughout the five not in a row chapters.⁹⁷ Panels are organized in a neat way but with an interesting use of colors. Every page resembles almost the same, when it comes to the tone to the alternating one. The sequence of colors is most creatively used in Chapter VI where the first page expresses the colors of the last one, but as if it was the mirror reflection. The sequence continues so that the middle pages form culminates this idea.⁹⁸

The panels used in the whole story take almost all the forms described by McCloud which proves the complexity of *Watchmen* not only in its plot but also form. An interesting artistic tool used by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons shows for instance subsequent panels, evenly divided into vertical rectangles, having gutter between them but still seen by the viewer as one image.⁹⁹ The fact that above these panels the author shows images in scene-to-scene transition, so not forming one image from the panels mentioned, makes it one of a kind. Precision in drawing is seen in moment-to-moment transitions where not much changes within the panels¹⁰⁰ as well as in the detailed backgrounds often depicting the gloomy city. Last panels from each issue provide the reader with the quotations and the image of a clock that reappears throughout the story. The portrayals of the main characters and their attributes resemble more of ordinary people than superheroes. “*Watchmen* is a multilayered work that represents the subversive potential of the superhero in relation to the state, both through political and visual discourses.¹⁰¹ All the artistic tools like the coloring, panel transition, the gutter that divides the images evenly, the use of a comic within a comic, or additional narratives form the British authors’ masterpiece.

⁹⁷ Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, # III, V, VIII, X, XI.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, # V, 14-15.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, # VII, 27.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, # X, 4.

¹⁰¹ *Images in Use: Towards the Critical Analysis of Visual Communication*, ed. by Matteo Stacchetti and Karin Kukkonen (Philadelphia: John Benjamins B.V., 2011), 289.

Alan Moore is known in the comic book industry for his extravagancy. The concepts presented in his pieces of art as well as his personal life affected by believing in magic make him an exceptional comic book writer. In the twelve issues of *Watchmen* Moore hands down the story set in contemporary America discussing the idea of a superhero. At the first glimpse when skimming the pages the comic appears to be a typical representative of the cape-type stories. Nevertheless there is much more about this story that brings many concepts of the past superhero texts but putting them in different light. It is clearly visible that the protagonists presented are far from resembling those from the Golden Age. This calls for the reevaluation of the stories that were read in the childhood.¹⁰² Most famous Marvel's and DC's superheroes share many features but when comparing Spider-Man or Superman to *Watchmen's* protagonists it turns out that it becomes aberrant to call them superheroes as well. There is more similarity when taking into consideration *Batman's* characters, but this story is also distinct from others falling into the category of cape-genre due to its dark and gloomy aspect. Hence, analysis of a superhero should be provided in order to understand the distinctiveness of Moore's characters.

All but one character of *Watchmen* are ordinary people having no special powers, but still calling themselves superheroes. Orrin E. Klapp divides real life heroes into five categories. Firstly, he distinguishes winners for whom world is a battle. They include those who are strong and compete in everyday life.¹⁰³ Next group are splendid performers who make an impression before the crowds. The way they interest the public is connected to their remarkable abilities not connected to strength as this would put them into the category of winners.¹⁰⁴ There are also those heroes who gain fame due to social

¹⁰² Geoff Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002), 67.

¹⁰³ Orrin E. Klapp, *Heroes, Villains, and Fools. The Changing American Character* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), 28.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

acceptability. Their traits of character make them likable in the society, and therefore recognizable and admired.¹⁰⁵ Fourth group distinguished by Klapp are independent spirits described as those who independently stand alone. Achievements of such heroes are not so important, but what matters the most is their will to be extraordinary. When being asked about independent spirits Americans usually point out to Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, but also Marlon Brando, and Robin Hood.¹⁰⁶ The last group embodies heroes who protect the weak and try to bring reforms, and it is not rare that they sacrifice themselves for the good of the others.¹⁰⁷ Having this characteristics one may define Rorschach as an independent characters who after the Kenee Act works alone in order to protect the weak.

However, this is not his major feature. From the beginning of the comic book Rorschach, whose real name is Walter Kovacs, appears to the reader more as a villain than a hero. He wears an old and dirty coat, and a horrifying mask with the blot test patterns that changes its motif. There is nothing in the way he looks like that would resemble typical American superheroes. Moreover, he smells in an unpleasant way which is observed by the people who he encounters.¹⁰⁸ Even when being undercover he seems to be slovenly and unattractive. His everyday activities have abnormal character, for instance eating red beans straight from the can¹⁰⁹ does not refer to any other superhero character. What makes Rorschach different from a typical superhero is also the fact that his face is tired and looks old. Through the flashbacks he reveals his terrible past when he was abused by his prostitute mother and bullied by the boys from the neighborhood. An interesting tool used in this case by the authors is the deferred action that keeps the reader informed.¹¹⁰ Rorschach's deeds are cruel and his mind is hunted by the stories from the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 39.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 43.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 46.

¹⁰⁸ Moore and Gibbons, # I, 15.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., # I, 10.

¹¹⁰ Klock, 67.

past which is the most visible in the Chapter VI when Kovacs is being examined by the psychiatrist. The past events have left their imprint on his psyche which appears in the way Rorschach answers to the blot test.

His thoughts and language represent the grim self that lasts till the end of the story. Rorschach's journal is full of gloomy and disturbing descriptions of places: "The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown."¹¹¹ The cragged boxes with the text of the diary add more disturbance to the words within. Rorschach's queries involve the reader in thinking about the hidden layer of the story: "We never die in bed. Sometimes in our personalities, perhaps? Some animal urge to fight and struggle, making us what we are?"¹¹² Hence, the reader can observe the actions of the character, but what is more significant is that one may actually understand the way of the hero's reasoning and feel being part of the story. Rorschach, without having typical characteristics of a masked hero, does not struggle against some other masked character but simply fights crime. The author's intention however never was to look at this type of characters as being more violent, but to present other possibilities in the representation of the very idea of the hero.¹¹³

Geoff Klock admits that he does not see the reason for placing superheroes in the story where they do not try to eliminate masked villains. This disturbs the convention typical of this genre of comic books where the characters with super powers are placed in the real world in order to fight also non human enemies.¹¹⁴ However what seems to be the real villain in *Watchmen* is in fact the whole system with the government leading the way. At the same time Klock observes another innovation that Alan Moore incorporated in his work. *Watchmen's* protagonists wear costumes not only to be unrecognized but because

¹¹¹ Moore and Gibbons, # I, 1.

¹¹² Ibid. # II, 26.

¹¹³ Khoury, 120.

¹¹⁴ Klock, 63-64.

of the sexual fetish. Among the heroes there are those who admit that they are homosexuals and those who claim to take sexual pleasure in being attacked.¹¹⁵ Others, such as Nite Owl, whose real identity is Dan Dreiberg, need the costume as he does not feel confident enough without it in intimate situations.¹¹⁶ Klock observes that Moore's intention was probably to make the readers think of the accusations against the comic books described in the *Seduction of the Innocence*.¹¹⁷ Hence, the narrative presents superheroes, who are typically connected to the adventurous stories, but in more horror like plot that one may experience from the first issue in which Rorschach investigates death of one of his colleagues from the past.

Comedian, known also as Edward Blake, was found dead in his apartment which is the starting point of *Watchmen*. The reader meets him as a wrinkled middle-aged man, lying killed in his dressing gown. The concept of beginning the storyline with seeing a hero killed, in the stains of blood is definitely another innovation that Moore applies to the story. According to the flashbacks of the other characters the personality of Comedian is revealed and what is sure, his nickname has nothing to do with it. The only thing that has something in common with being funny is a smiley face badge that he wears. Comedian appears to be one of the cruelest people in the story, a rapist, and an ignorant. At the same time he is really strong and persuasive. He represents the side which acts in the name of law, as after passing Keene Act he decides to work for the government. Nevertheless, Comedian is far from being a moral person, he rapes and kills innocent people.¹¹⁸ He uses his political power to achieve what he wants without being called to account, yet he gets killed since even if he calls himself a superhero, he still remains a mortal human being.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Moore and Gibbons, # VII.

¹¹⁷ Klock, 65.

¹¹⁸ Moore and Gibbons, # II, 6-7.

The only character having real superpowers, and at the same time resembling the protagonists from the Golden Age of comic book industry is Dr. Manhattan, whose real identity is Jon Osterman. He fits perfectly in the characteristic of a typical superhero, as he gained his powers through an accident,¹¹⁹ we do not know much about his past, and he does not look like a typical human being because of his muscular and blue body. Even if Dr. Manhattan seems to be a typical superhero, his reasoning and the change in his attitude throughout the storyline is different from other American cape characters. He struggles with his thoughts and the fact that he is able to see the future. Dr. Manhattan was also accused of sending the radiation that causes cancer among people who were close to him for some time.¹²⁰ This makes him feel hopeless and this mood is intensified by the fact that people turned their back on him. What makes him different from the most recognizable superheroes like Superman, Captain America or Spider-Man is the fact that even if he is aware of his previous identity, well-respected scientist in love with a girl, he cannot go back to this form. The moment in which he turned to be Dr. Manhattan is also the moment when Jon Osterman disappeared.

James DiGiovanna observes that being split into two is one of the phenomena that an ordinary human being cannot imagine. He assumes that it would be difficult for a person to find the real-me in a situation when two distinct creatures share one brain. It is impossible to prove that Joe Osterman and his alter ego Dr. Manhattan is one person, due to the fact that they do not share the same experiences.¹²¹ Moreover, because of Dr. Manhattan's ability to create his clones, who can do different things at the same time, his girlfriend cannot see a human being in him anymore.¹²² Dr. Manhattan is also not seen as a man by the American nation but in fact he is treated as a superman. Arthur Ward goes

¹¹⁹ Ibid., # IV, 7.

¹²⁰ Ibid., # 3.

¹²¹ James DiGiovanna, "Dr. Manhattan, I Presume?" in *Watchmen and Philosophy*, ed. by Mark D. White (New Jersey: Wiley & Sons, 2009), 113.

¹²² Moore and Gibbons, # III, 4-6.

further and suggests Dr. Manhattan's similarity to God. He enumerates three features of the Almighty: having power, being good, and knowing everything.¹²³ Hence, it is possible for the depicted in *Watchmen* American urban nation to see in this blue muscular creature a savior. However, he does not see himself in such a way. In fact Dr. Manhattan is not sure whether God exists: "If there is, I'm not him."¹²⁴ Alan Moore joined the three God's qualities in one hero creating a person whom one could call the best of all, but in the story this is not Dr. Manhattan who gains the most popularity. His distinctness and the struggle he takes within himself enable him from being a leader of the nation.

2.2. Veidt: super-leader of the nation?

Great leadership has always been a part of every country's tradition. It is rooted in the history, embodied in the literature, and is a topic of a great concern for the media. It is evident that when being asked about the well known person from their own country one may point out to the people that had a significant impact on their nations' history. There are those who gained the recognition through politics, military activeness or religion, but also individuals known for their intellectual traits or artistic side. Sometimes they are not really connected with their deeds but their names are embodied in their country's culture so strong, that it seems right to mention them when talking about one's mother land. However, usually people glorify those about whom they had learnt at school or heard about in the media. A number of social scientists try to enumerate what makes one person loved and admired. The characteristics of the great leaders of different kind are described by Mark Robert Pollele. The author divided fields within which heroes of the nations are found and introduces the biographies of those who are known for their powerful attitude.

¹²³ Arthur Ward, "Free Will And Foreknowledge" in *Watchmen and Philosophy*, ed. by Mark D. White (New Jersey: Wiley & Sons, 2009), 127.

¹²⁴ Moore and Gibbons, # III, 11.

He points out that every great leader is actually an artist but at the same time he agrees with the statement uttered by Barbara Kellerman that it is not an easy task to describe leadership as it has been attempted to do so for ages and yet it has not been fully accomplished.¹²⁵

In the introduction to his book collecting world's most recognizable figures, Pollele tries to organize what has been written about the leadership so far. He points to the fact that within the years many concepts on this matter appeared and evolved. The author begins with the idea that becoming a national leader is not a matter of training but of being born one. He enumerates the ways in which national leaders acted emphasizing the fact that ones, giving the example of Franklin Roosevelt, answers to the problem with new concepts whereas others with changing the society.¹²⁶ Thus, Pollele highlights the fact that there is no one closed characteristic of leadership. He also pays attention to the fact that since the world has changed and a variety of cultures evolved, the concept of a leadership has shifted as well.¹²⁷ Hence, one may not simply points to the set of traits that would characterize any given leader. Providing the examples of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, Pollele asks the reader to think whether being different, an outsider, helps an individual to gain power over others and lead the masses. Moreover, the author states that what actually makes a good leader is having an enemy that would represent the contrary, evil side.¹²⁸

In *Watchmen*, as in every typical superhero comic book, the protagonists fight with their enemies that are on the other side of the law. Most well known works on this theme, following the example of world's mainstream Superman, are famous for having bad heroes as well. The main character not only does fight against lawbreakers but also he finds enemies with the leaders of the dark side. The reader facing *Watchmen* for the first

¹²⁵ Mark Robert Pollele, introduction to *Leadership: fifty great leaders and the worlds they made* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008), ix.

¹²⁶ Ibid., xii.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., xiii.

time might get confused as the heroes do not resemble anything a person has in mind when thinking about superhero comic book. The storyline is far from being similar to the Golden Age works marked by the capes. Nevertheless, it describes superheroes but both, those that had been active before the main story started, and those who under the Keene Act of 1977 worked for the Government or against the law, on their own.¹²⁹ Still recognizable but with the negative connotations ex-superheroes decide to change their lives completely having an ordinary jobs, or like Rorschach decide to work undercover. Among the heroes who chose to leave their profession in order to live the life of a typical citizen is Adrian Veidt, also known as Ozymandias.

Veidt seems to have all what a great leader, even a national hero, needs. He is described as the smartest man on the planet. After inheriting a fortune he gave it away to the charity showing how generous he is. He is likeable by Americans, and his image in the media is positive. In the adult life when he becomes Ozymandias, he decides to follow the footsteps of the idol of his childhood Alexander the Great who lived in the times when people needed a hero and a strong leader as they were afraid of Persian invasion. Ancient Greeks perceived a hero as a man who outrages others by his intellect and extraordinary traits of character.¹³⁰ Even his physical appearance was described by this of a powerful leader.¹³¹ Not without significance is the fact that Alexander was a student of Aristotle. The philosopher not only did teach him medicine, science, and poetry but also the ideals of politics.¹³² Having such a hero as a role example and possessing extraordinary qualities Veidt seems to be on a good way to become a great leader of the nation.

However, within the story one finds out that even if Veidt's intentions concerning the society he lives in are good, he wants to use wrong means in order to accomplish his

¹²⁹ Moore and Gibbons, #IV, 23.

¹³⁰ Agnes Savill, *Alexander the Great and His Time* (Barnes & Noble, 1993), 2.

¹³¹ Savill, 18.

¹³² Philip Freeman, *Alexander the Great* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 26.

ideas. Rorschach and Nite Owl realize that their old colleague is the one who is responsible for killing other members of the Minutemen and discover his wicked plan that includes shattering some innocent people. They try to stop him but really soon it turns out that they fail. The one who is the closest of keeping Veidt away from realizing his plan is Rorschach who at this time relates to the superheroes of the past comic book, only through his deeds though. On the other hand, Veidt by the way he looks like resembles more a typical hero than villain. In fact he has the physical characteristic of the comic book superhero well known in America since the 1940s, Captain America. This makes one to think if physical appearance indicates that people think of one person as of a good leader and a hero, whereas about other quite the contrary? Orrin Klapp indicates that for instance Billy the Kid was not a good example of a typical villain since he was a handsome and blonde man with blue eyes. Such looks and the fact that he was desired by women puts him equally with such characters as Robin Hood or Don Juan.¹³³ Due to this fact when seeing Veidt for the first time he seems to have only good intentions and nothing can reveal what cruel plan he really has in mind, whereas Rorschach with his slovenly appearance seems to be on the evil side.

Robert Loftis contrasted these two characters and concluded that Ozymandias can be described as a *consequentialist*.¹³⁴ He depicts Veidt in this way since the hero thinks only about the effect of his plan. He seems to be careless about the fact that when sending on the city a machine that supposes to scare people in order to keep the nation close, many of them would be killed. Veidt assumes that when choosing less evil option, he is right. Rorschach on the other hand is seen by Loftis as a *deontologist*. He opposes Veidt's plan as he finds it immoral, and he acts in a way that shows that the means to an end are in fact

¹³³ Klapp, 50.

¹³⁴ Robert Loftis „Means, Ends, and the Critique of Pure Superheroes” in *Watchmen and Philosophy* ed. by Mark D. White (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 64.

very important.¹³⁵ The views represented by these characters reveal that there is no one easy way to gain justice in the world, but as Loftis observes, the author more of these philosophical concepts critiques the *authoritarianism*.¹³⁶ There is not really of that importance if one of the heroes represents this or the other way of thinking, what is of a great significance is the fact that the superheroes reflect the power. The power that is infected by corruption since the Kenee Act has come into effect.¹³⁷ Hence, the leadership of Ozymandias echoes the authoritative system.

Veidt is also described as a clever and bright man. It is believed that the more educated people, the less aggressive and therefore fewer villains exist. However, crime rates show that this is not true, moreover, that vilification increases.¹³⁸ It turns out that Veidt controls the world in order to, in his opinion, help people. On the one hand he acts as a good hero, trying to act for the joint good, but on the other hand his intentions are based on the lies and cruelty. Klapp distinguishes in his book different kind of villains, and Veidt seems to fit in the description of the usurper and abuser. Such oppressors use their status in order to achieve what they want.¹³⁹

Veidt observes the world using a number of television screens. Not only does he watch different programs but also he is able to monitor others through the surveillance cameras. Toirin Monahan observes that people do not want to know whether the surveillance system work as they want to believe it does. They see modern technologies as something that is separated from the society and therefore when technology fails the responsibility is put on humans.¹⁴⁰ When thinking about the effectiveness of surveillance system Monahan asks about its impact on power and democracy. He claims that it should

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 65.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 74.

¹³⁸ Klapp, 51.

¹³⁹ Klapp, 55.

¹⁴⁰ Toirin Monahan, „Questioning Surveillance and Security” in *Technology and Society. Building Our Sociotechnical Future*, ed. by Deborah G. Johnson and Jameson M. Wetmore (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009, 535-563), 544-545.

be made more transparent since in the United States the citizens are not aware where the cameras are arranged and who is observing them. In the United Kingdom on the other hand, there are strict rules concerning the storage of information possessed from the surveillance system. Monahan advises conducting surveys in order to increase the participation of citizens in questioning the effects of surveillance.¹⁴¹ He claims that it would help for national security since the involvement of public would “help to limit violations of civil liberties, detect fraud, correct security vulnerabilities, and decrease the need for extensive surveillance systems.”¹⁴² There is actually no evidence to prove that surveillance system is effective, moreover, it may actually cause misleading sense of protection in citizens.¹⁴³ In *Watchmen* Veidt being able to observe the nation uses this power to control others. He is a public person being popular among the nation but not because of his past activity as a superhero but because he becomes a celebrity in some way, having even imitating him.

The conditions of today’s world unable heroes to appear as people are more interested in celebrities who do not share the ideals represented in the myths about god-like creatures.¹⁴⁴ In order to become a hero one should take part in an unplanned adventure that is different from everyday life activities, and succeed in meeting the challenge. An important factor here is that the actions cannot be planned earlier as the hero reacts on the spot with right answers.¹⁴⁵ Hence, preparing for a certain action beforehand does not make a hero. The idea is that a person like this should know what to do, and act in a way that would gain profits. Moreover, one should leave the reality in order to find the mystery world which often means the battle within oneself. It is a difficult task nowadays since a person is no longer anonymous in today’s world, but he or she has to encounter the

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 551.

¹⁴² Ibid., 552.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 553.

¹⁴⁴ Ian I. Mitroff, and Warren Bennis, *The Unreality Industry: The Deliberate Manufacturing of Falsehood and What It Is Doing to Our Lives* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1989), 149.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 150.

interest of the media.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, fighting a battle within oneself is a handicap since nobody is left truly alone with his or her thoughts. Everything is discussed by the media and might hinder the process of a break from the society in order to find oneself.

Watchmen describes Veidt as a celebrity who knows everything and is held in high regard by the society. There is not a single person in the USA who would not know who he is. He is in the spotlight all the time and that is why he has to be careful with his dreadful plan. The fact that he preplanned everything shows that he does not fulfill the expectations of a hero presented by Ian I. Mitroff and Warren Bennis. He has a well-thought-out strategy, every detail is prepared carefully, so he does not have to make decisions on the spot. Due to the fact that the outcome of his plan will be observed by the world through the media not only has he prepared everything beforehand but also he has no time to develop the hero within himself. He separates from the world but still in his Arctic office Veidt observes the whole world through the television screens. Yet, in fact he does not spend this time on thinking on his plan but rather thinking how to fulfill it and stop Nite Owl and Rorschach from interrupting. He controls everything using surveillance cameras through which he is able to observe every part of the world. Nevertheless, his main source of power is acquired from the media as it accelerates the feeling of anxiety within the people in America.

2.3. The media as the means to control the world

Many circumstances that appear in *Watchmen* take place because of the media involvement. Veidt observes the world so that he knew that Rorschach and Nite Own are coming to defeat him, Dr. Manhattan becomes a national hero after helping to win the Vietnam War which is described in the newspapers but he also loses his former

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 150.

worshippers when appearing in a television program that revealed the possibility of him being the cause of cancer among his friends. *Watchmen* pays attention to the power that the media has over the people and highlights the fact that there are those who follow whatever they see, read or hear in it. This is not just the comic book's fiction but the reflection of the real media power.

In the part of the story which concerns Veid thinking whether to start his evil plan of sending on America the machine that would pretend to be an extraterrestrial creature he sits in his office watching a plenty of television sets showing different programs. At one point he notices that a commercial of a candy bar has sexual subtext within. He says: "The subtext increased sexual imagery, even in the candy ads. It implies an erotic undercurrent not uncommon in times of war. Remember the baby boom..."¹⁴⁷ Veidt is aware of the policy which is used by the advertising agencies and he decodes the message behind the commercial. He points here to the fact that using an image of an attractive person eating the candy bar would encourage people to buy it, as sexuality is the base of the consumer societies.¹⁴⁸ Veidt thinks of investing in erotic business and considers buying shares in companies aimed at baby food. These two panels show how people can be controlled by the media through the hidden messages even in commercials, and how others can take advantage of it. Nevertheless, more panels than on advertising are devoted to the media approaching political situation.

Watchmen deals with the United States' military policy. It shows some parts of the Vietnam War which, in the story, turns out to be won due to the superheroes' involvement. At the same time it reveals the true nature of Comedian who kills with premeditation the unarmed woman carrying his child.¹⁴⁹ Hence, on the one hand it shows

¹⁴⁷ Moore and Gibbons, # X, 8.

¹⁴⁸ Arthur Asa Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising's Impact on American Character and Society* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011), 91.

¹⁴⁹ Moore and Gibbons, # II, 15.

the military heroes to whom the enemy defeated, but on the other hand the comic depicts the cruelty and immoral behavior of the soldiers. Such a behavior was confronted in the literature concerning the war, for instance in *The Winter Soldier Investigation* the author provides the reader with the examples of immoral behavior of American soldiers.¹⁵⁰ Aggression, terror, and violence are inherent aspects of the stories told by the veterans. Sgt. Michael McCusker reveals the craving for revenge that led many American soldiers. They were able to fire the whole village full of civilians only to avenge the death of one Marine. Moreover, he describes acts of clubbing innocent people, as well as killing 10 year-old boy.¹⁵¹ His confessions are terrifying but may change completely the opinion of an American Marine one had had before. These cruel actions and treating Vietnamese people as subhuman seem to resemble Comedian's lifestyle, and as after finding out some facts about the war Americans became more resistant towards it, the same in *Watchmen* when revealing the cruelty of Comedian people starts to rebel against superheroes.¹⁵²

The change of the attitude towards Dr. Manhattan starts to be visible after the broadcasted interview in which a terrifying fact is being revealed. People immediately start to believe in what has been said and follow the opinion they heard. Benjamin I. Page enumerates typical characteristic that make people believe in the message provided by the media. He points out that the viewer takes the information as valid when it is received in an understandable way, it has sense but brings the contrary message to the one believed previously, and is credible.¹⁵³ Hence, believing in Dr. Manhattan's god-like abilities was easily hindered by the message concerning his friends and lovers from the past suffering from cancer after meeting him. This was confronted with the pictures and confessions of the people mentioned which added the credibility to this piece of information. The

¹⁵⁰ *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry Into American War Crimes*, ed. by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 28-45.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Moore and Gibbons, # II, 17-18.

¹⁵³ Benjamin I. Page "What Moves Public Opinion?" in *Media Power in Politics*, ed. by Doris A Graber (Washington, DC: CQ Press: 2011), 86.

character from *Watchmen* whose opinions are reliable is the president. In the story Richard Nixon is presented in his run to another term in office. In reality however, where the Vietnam War was actually lost, Nixon's views concerning his opinion on a number of issues connected affected the public opinion due to the media's impact.¹⁵⁴ The case of Lieutenant William Calley who was guilty of slaying civilians during the Vietnam War turned out to have the impact on some people's views on Nixon. In the letter from Captain Daniel that was published for the public the inconsistency of the president is highlighted as once he shows his disapproval towards Calley's deeds, but later he changes the sentence of the court into much lighter.¹⁵⁵

Veidt's plan of preventing the nuclear war with the Soviets through having the same enemy for both nations can be accomplish only due to the impact that the media have. The machine that supposes to pretend an alien who wants to destroy the world is being broadcasted in the news all over the world, and written about in the international newspapers. Noam Chomsky investigated the impact of the media and he named the features that make it so influential. Veidt seems to use the strategy of inventing false problems in order to find the solutions to them, hence prevent the further disaster.¹⁵⁶ The media are used by him also to fulfill Chomsky's strategies concerning playing with people's emotions¹⁵⁷, as well as not revealing the methods¹⁵⁸ he used when making the creature that shocked Americans and the rest of the world. The whole planet was focused on the fact that innocent people got killed and that might have happened to them as well. They were not thinking reasonable but through their emotions which also causes a number of changes in the politics. Not only is the coming war with the Soviets stopped, but also

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 94.

¹⁵⁵ "Trial of Lieutenant William Culley," November 12, 1970- March 28, 1971 in *Annals of America* Chicago 1976, vol. 19, doc. 42, 206-210.

¹⁵⁶ *Noam Chomsky Quotes*, "10 strategies of manipulation," accessed March 29, 2013, stable URL: <http://noam-chomsky.tumblr.com/post/13867896307/noam-chomsky-10-strategies-of-manipulation-by-the>.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

troops from Afghanistan are withdrawn. The way Veid uses technology in order to fulfill his plan is a secret to others which gives him the ability to control the world.

In *Watchmen* the perspective in which people see the world is controlled also by the journalists with not very dedicated attitude. The office of the newspaper is depicted as messy and the workers are more interested in having lunch than in investigating the material which had been sent by the readers. Among the letters there is a Rorschach's journal which could reveal the whole story with the extraterrestrial creature designed by Veidt but the evidence seems to be neglected.¹⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the researches show that when it comes to governmental activities or scandals, the media serve as the main source of information on these events. Moreover, they influence the audience so that a certain attitude or belief may be transferred to an individual.¹⁶⁰ Lance Bennett and William Serrin define the idea of watchdog journalism as free of governmental control activity that questions public institutions in order to inform the audience.¹⁶¹ A sphere in which people are allowed to exchange their opinions on the authorities is required by democracy. The main contribution to it is played by the media.¹⁶² It is visible nowadays that the press came into a specific pattern in which it comments on the political issues in a negative tone without providing reliable materials.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Moore and Gibbons, # XII, 22.

¹⁶⁰ *The Dynamics of Mass Communication*, ed. Joseph R. Dominick (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 3rd edition, 1990), 505.

¹⁶¹ W. Lance Bennett and William Serrin, "The Watchdog Role of the Press" in *Media Power in Politics* ed. Doris A. Graber (Washington D.C.: CQ PRESS, 2011), 396.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 398.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 401.

Chapter III

Politics of superheroes in American popular culture

3.1. Political and cultural subtext in American comic books.

It has been observed that popular culture plays an important role in politics. Chris Murray points out that the period during which one may see the growth of its significance is World War Two due to the fact that the years preceding it were marked by the technological development.¹⁶⁴ This was also the time when American comic books became interested in the topic which soon started to be visible in the themes of superhero issues. The villains of the comic books were about to change from the masked creatures into Nazi. Over the course of time American comic books brought up a number of issues concerning current policies. The second layer of the texts often exposes their authors' attitudes towards problems concerning governing, morality, terrorism, health, or homosexuality.

Marc DiPaolo in his book *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda In Comics and Film* comments on the way in which superhero genre has shaped public

¹⁶⁴ Chris Murray, "Propaganda: Superhero comics and propaganda" in *Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*, ed. by Anne Magnussen, Hans-Christian Christiansen, (Denmark: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2000), 141.

opinion in America.¹⁶⁵ He admits that destructive and violent times in political history make the most wanted stories in comic books.¹⁶⁶ Superhero stories in the time of their splendor brought up themes such as Pearl Harbor, Holocaust or Roosevelt administration policies.¹⁶⁷ Described in this paper *Watchmen* focuses, in the characters' flashbacks, on the Vietnam War presenting it as a won battle but it also portrays Richard Nixon's terms in office. Of course, in the story he gained much popularity due to the fact that the pact with the Minutemen let him triumph in Asia but his attitude is portrayed as despotic. The political values he represents in *Watchmen* focus rather on gaining and holding powers. The superheroes, on the other hand, unlike to their Marvel's or DC's predecessors are far from being moral and just. The reader is persuaded to think that Comedian has a hand in JFK's assassination which puts Nixon in even more disadvantaged position when it comes to morality of the character. The last pages of the 12th issue suggest that new candidate, an actor Robert Redford, which inclines Ronald Reagan, might step for the presidential office. Even if Moore describes real political icons and events, the main focus in the story is put into the issue of civilian rights.

Watchmen presents the American reality as being under constant surveillance. Using the topic of being observed and what it means for the society makes the reader to actually think of the morality in this. Moreover, rereading *Watchmen* nowadays may get one to the conclusion that America presented is of what today's world look likes when it comes to digital technology. In the story Veidt uses cameras and screens to see what is going on in the world and to shape the public opinion. Pew Research Center conducted a study in which it turned out that Americans are more concerned about their civil liberties

¹⁶⁵ Marc DiPaolo, *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda In Comics and Film* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011).

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1-4.

¹⁶⁷ Harry Brod, *Superman is Jewish? How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 68.

than about terrorist attack.¹⁶⁸ This is because the awareness about the anti-terrorism policies and their restrictions concerning the rights of the civilians increased. Nowadays Americans become more aware of being watched and this issue concerns them more than a few years ago when they were focused more on the possibility of the assassins' attacks.

In 2004 *In the Shadow of No Towers* by Art Spiegelman was published reflecting the traumatic experience of 9/11.¹⁶⁹ The piece of work is very detailed and often difficult in its form, which encourages the reader to follow the panels in different directions. The pages often include real photographs resembling a collage. Fear is omnipresent in the story, and the work itself refers to the author's famous *Maus*¹⁷⁰ since Spiegelman compares the evil of the Holocaust with what happened in September 11. Nevertheless, the story is not only about the terrorist attacks but in its deep meaning it reflects the feelings over the policy of these years that Spiegelman shared with many other Americans. He is quoted by Scott Thill in his review as follows: "The feelings of dislocation reflected in these *No Towers* pages arose in part from the lack of outcry against the outrages while they were being committed,"¹⁷¹ and points out that George W. Bush's administration is considered by many as loathed. However, the feeling of injustice when it comes to politics of the country depends on one's point of view and it should not be taken for granted.

The themes that question political justice and morality are discussed in variety of American comic books. Ted McKeever, who is recognized as a writer and artist known for his surreal works, often deals with the theme of uncontrolled technology.¹⁷² In *Plastic Forks: Trauma Humane* he juxtaposes individualistic fashion of bizarre and blurry

¹⁶⁸ "Few See Adequate Limits on NSA Surveillance Program," *PewResearch Center for the People & the Press*, accessed: July 28, 2013, stable URL: <http://www.people-press.org/2013/07/26/few-see-adequate-limits-on-nsa-surveillance-program/#liberties-terrorism>, last modified: July 26, 2013.

¹⁶⁹ Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (New York: Viking Adult, 2004).

¹⁷⁰ Art Spiegelman, *Maus* (New York City: Pantheon Books, 1991).

¹⁷¹ Scott Thill, "*In the Shadow of No Towers*" by Art Spiegelman, last modified: September 10, 2004, stable URL: <http://www.salon.com/2004/09/10/spiegelman/>.

¹⁷² "Ted McKeever," *Comicvine*, accessed July 14, 2013, stable URL: <http://www.comicvine.com/ted-mckeeper/4040-5385/>.

drawings with the plot concerning bodily modification and tests on animals. Not only is the story surreal but also the graphic devices, used by the author, shatter the visual perception. Robert C. Harvey points out that it is a difficult task to evaluate artist's style due to the individuality of the use of different artistic tools that may not appeal to everybody.¹⁷³ He enumerates aspects of style that one may associate with a certain comic book writers. When taking into consideration the first book of *Plastic Forks*, Ted McKeever seems to be one of these artists who came up with easily recognizable drawings, page layouts, compositions, and the story itself.

At the first glance *Plastic Forks* seems to be very typical comic book but giving it a closer look one may discover that the panels are designed in an original way. Panels are said to be the realizations of a moment,¹⁷⁴ hence the composition should be carefully thought out to make the reader understand the message behind them. There is no stiff order of panels in McKeever's work, thus one cannot expect what layout is to be presented on the next page as they vary from page to page. This however makes the topic of bodily modification discussed in the story even more disturbing. The uncanny plot corresponding with the interesting style of the author makes the story curious and individual piece of art. Ted McKeever achieved a high level of recognition within the world of comic books making the topics discussed in the end of the 20th century as the themes of his works.

The 1990s was still the time when America struggled with the fear of AIDS which also became the metaphor of the literary works. Charles Burns in the comic book series titled *Black Hole* introduces a group of teenagers who struggle with the virus that causes mutations in the human body.¹⁷⁵ It is transmitted through sexual intercourse and the

¹⁷³ Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 152.

¹⁷⁴ Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*. (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007), 128.

¹⁷⁵ Charles Burns, *Black Hole* (Princeton: Kitchen Sink Press, 1991-2005).

mutations it causes vary in form and size. The fact that the infected teenagers start to look different from the others leaves them outside the society. Even if Burns presents fictional characters and events, the story reflects the attitudes accompanied the fear of the 1990s and the policies around it. *Black Hole* characters who are the virus carriers are portrayed as miserable creatures, living either alone or within the group of other mutants having nobody to take care of their disease. This is the reflection of how HIV positive people were treated in America when not much was known about the virus. Marietta Federici-LaFargue describes the growth of projects that helped people to get to know the disease better and the organizations aimed at helping sick people not only to deal with AIDS itself but also to come back to the society. She presents figures concerning increasing numbers of volunteers and organizations which proves the change in societies' perspective on this issue.¹⁷⁶

What came with the fear of AIDS was also the prejudice over homosexuals and the public opinion that it can be medically treated or nipped in the bud, as parents were under the accusation of having the influence on children's sexuality. Researches on parents' impact on their children's sexual orientation were conducted but it is still difficult to answer to this query. Scientists support a biological basis for being either heterosexual or homosexual, and in general they claim that wondering about a child's sexual orientation has no point as none research revealed that tomboys grow up to be lesbians whereas sissy boys turn up to be gays.¹⁷⁷ Hence, behavior of youngsters does not tell whether a child will develop a certain sexual preference, as their character will change considerably within the years. The impact of parents on this issue seems to be meaningless. Also Marjorie Garber in the essay *The Return to Biology* points out that

¹⁷⁶ Marietta Federici-LaFargue "AIDS – A Community Answers The Call" in *Confronting the AIDS Epidemic: Cross-cultural Perspectives on HIV/Aids Education*, ed. by Davidson Chukwuma Umeh (New Jersey: Africa Word Press, Inc., 1997), 153-158.

¹⁷⁷ *About Kids Health*, last modified: March 20, 2009, accessed: January 30, 2013, stable URL: <http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/En/News/DrPat/Pages/How-much-influence-do-parents-have-on-their-childs-sexual-orientation.aspx>.

sexual orientation implies destiny, whereas sexual preference implies a choice,¹⁷⁸ and homosexuality is not a choice as scientists proved.¹⁷⁹ Therefore, parents are not responsible for their children's sexual orientation. "Society tends to treat male homosexuals as if they had a choice about their sexual orientation, when in fact they have no more choice about how they develop than heterosexuals do," said Dr. Judd Marmor for *New York Times*.¹⁸⁰ Even researches conducted over twenty years earlier revealed that from the examined "sissy boys" only one became transsexual. The research did not show that these were the parents who 'created' boys with feminine behaviors.¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, the policy towards homosexuality is still being discussed and it is also visible as one of the themes in comics.

The relationship between parents and daughter discovering her homosexuality is the topic of Alison Bechdel's autobiographical graphic novel. *Fun Home* aims at showing the childhood in a house where author's father turned out to be homosexual.¹⁸² The comic presents in a great detail the attitude of a father towards his daughter, and becoming aware of her homosexual orientation. Mr. Bechdel is depicted as a strict parent who pays a lot of attention to the house decorations. Huge part of the story concerns his fascination with art as well as literature. Even if what appears to be the main issue of the story is the author's sexuality, the figure of a father gains much attention whereas the mother is left unconcern. The story touches also on a delicate issue of married to opposite-sex people who are in fact sexually responsive to same-sex individuals. However, it is mainly a study of a child's with lost father psyche. Howard Cruse in his graphic novel presents Toland Polk who tells the story of his youth when he tried to deceive his true self. *Stuck Rubber Baby*

¹⁷⁸ Marjorie Garber, "The Return to Biology" in *Queer Theory*, ed. by Iain Morland and Annabelle Willox (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 54.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁸⁰ Jane E. Brody, "Boyhood Effeminacy and Late Homosexuality" in *New York Times* (December 16, 1986), accessed: January 30, 2013, stable URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/16/science/boyhood-effeminacy-and-late-homosexuality.html>.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home. A Family Tragicomic*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007).

focuses on the main character's sexuality but it also shows, in the protagonist's flashbacks, the intolerance and racism in the American South in the 1960s.¹⁸³ The reader gets to know Toland's parents before the car accident in which they both died. Here the relationship is presented as typical to American South of the 60s. Mr. Polk is depicted quite the contrary to Mr. Bechdel. He is very masculine, works in the garage but at the same time he shares Bechdel's love to literature. His absence in young boy's life is similar to the feelings that Alison Bechdel had when it comes to the relations with her father. In the Introduction to *Stuck Rubber Baby* she wrote that she identifies with the main character of the book.¹⁸⁴

Identity is what in fact may join all the stories presented. The main characters either in superhero, fiction or autobiographical comics often struggle with the notion of identity which is not uncommon in American culture. It became the theme of the inaugural address of George W. Bush in which he stated that: "America has never been united by blood, or birth, or soil", nevertheless, "we are bound by ideals that move us beyond our backgrounds."¹⁸⁵ The superheroes, who often come from different planets, knowing not much about their past, search for their identity as many other Americans. This might be something that would let a reader relate to them. In fact, this theme may also correspond to the case that the most well known early comic books writers who are connected to superhero genre were actually Jewish. Hence, the sense of identity is even more highlighted in the deep meaning of the text. Yet, for the readers it has never been the issue of comparing Superman's story to the Jewish nation but rather enjoying the plot in which the hero fights for justice in the world.

¹⁸³ Howard Cruse, *Stuck Rubber Baby* (Poznań: Centrala, 2011. Originally published by DC Comics in 1995).

¹⁸⁴ Alice Bechdel, Introduction to *Stuck Rubber Baby*, by Howard Cruse (Poznań: Centrala, 2011. Originally published by DC Comics in 1995).

¹⁸⁵ George W. Bush, "First Inaugural Address January 20, 2001," *Project Gutenberg*, accessed: July 20, 2013, stable URL: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/925/925-h/925-h.htm#link2H_4_0055.

Even if the first American superhero comic books did not aim at sending any strictly political messages they surely presented American values. Cape-characters fought for justice in the world through their hard work and they saved people who were deprived of freedom. Nevertheless, in the face of dreadful times in the history, to the fictional characters started to join real people who took the villains' places. That is why for instance Superman dealt with Adolf Hitler and twenty years later he struggled with the corruption concerning judicial system.¹⁸⁶ Danny Fingeroth in his book asks the reader what makes a superhero so important for a society that they can generate more and more stories on one fictional character, or create others with similar storylines. He implies that the superheroes in a way rescue the reader but he does not really provide the answer to his questions as this is something which should be analyzed individually.¹⁸⁷

3.2. Superhero in politics, or what Barack Obama and Spider-Man have in common

In order to gain success in almost every field of public life one needs to know with whom he or she should be associated with. Businessmen join various social clubs, celebrities try to attend the most exclusive parties organized by the popular culture icons, and politicians need to choose carefully to whom they are indentified. Some acquaintances may be either beneficial or harmful for one's image if this particular person's attitude is strongly rooted in culture. Fictional characters from superhero comic books have become recognized in American society so that even if a person has never read an issue on them, he or she is still able to point out facts about the heroes. Such an icon is for instance Superman who is probably the most well-known comic book protagonist fighting for justice in the universe.

¹⁸⁶ Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 17.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

The image of Clark Kent in his caped disguise is widely used all over the world. Clothing companies use the *S* sign for its products, typical font from the cover of *Superman* issues is used for other texts, and not only films but games as well use the figure of the superhero. For an adult American, the protagonist is associated mostly with childhood, the time with no obligations, which may bring positive connotation. He is a character with superpowers, raised in America, who fights for justice and morality. During the World War Two Superman was depicted as a hero fighting against Nazi, however more in ‘what if’ fashion, as joining the war by him would probably ended up in the quick winning of the battle.¹⁸⁸ His blue costume with red cape is recognized by children and adults. The images depicting Barack Obama wearing Superman’s outfit are easy to find on the Internet. Not only are there airbrushed photographs but also one may look at the pictures of the street-art of New York City.¹⁸⁹ They are based on the graffiti and created with the use of a stencil, often adding some epigrams. The most recognizable paintings of this kind concerning Obama depict senator posing proudly, and showing the posture and clothes of Superman. In the background there is an American flag suggesting that this hero might save the nation from the problems they were facing.

Street-art may be a tool for political communication as it proved for instance in 1981 in Slovenia, when young people started to show the change in their consciousness using this form of art.¹⁹⁰ Pictures seen on the street may “[...] shape and move human emotions and gauge political sentiments.”¹⁹¹ At this point when graffiti showing Barack Obama as Superman appeared on the streets, one might have incorporated the image of the American beloved superhero with the candidate to the presidential office. Street art can

¹⁸⁸ Brody, 70-71.

¹⁸⁹ “Super Obama,” *Global Graphica*, accessed: May 8, 2013, stable URL: <http://globalgraphica.com/2008/10/27/super-obama-3/>.

¹⁹⁰ Sabrina Petra Romet, “Democratization in Slovenia – the second stage” in *Politics, Power and the Struggle for Democracy in South-East Europe* ed. by Karen Dawisha, Bruce Parrott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 193.

¹⁹¹ Lyman G. Chaffee, *Political Protest and Street Art: Popular Tools for Democratization* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), 4.

also be seen as a tool for mass communication due to the fact that it is universal.¹⁹² People seeing such images on the street without even being aware of this fact would store this picture in their memory, which may in the future display in a form of a positive attitude towards the politician. Moreover, the comparison would be duplicated in different forms.

The figure of a super-president started to evolve and soon the Internet became full of portraits showing Barack Obama wearing the same famous blue and red costume, but this time instead of the letter *S* which stands for Superman the letter *O* appeared. The author of this logo is a comic book artist Alex Ross.¹⁹³ It is possible to buy a T-shirt with such an image or even with the name of the president forming the emblem of Superman. The illustration printed is unambiguously associated with the strength, supernatural power, and fight for justice. It also brings the humoristic, yet positive, connotation to the politician. In fact, Barack Obama is known for his sense of humor – just to mention for instance his appearance in a famous *The Ellen Degeneres Show* in 2008 in which he danced on the air as celebrities invited by the host.¹⁹⁴ This attitude allows the president to take part in a roast, which is a program aimed at making fun of the main star. The guests of a roast defend themselves also in cabaret performance. Barack Obama at Alfred E. Smith's Dinner jokes about being born on Krypton.¹⁹⁵ The fact that Superman was born there is deeply rooted in American culture so the audience answers with laugh immediately. In 2012 the whole presidential family was turned into *The Incredibles*.¹⁹⁶ Here it is suggested that not only the president has super powers but his relatives as well. They play in the same team in order to fight evil.

¹⁹² Ibid., 3.

¹⁹³ Alex Ross, last modified: October 31, 2008, stable URL: <http://www.alexrossart.com/rossreport.asp?id=466>.

¹⁹⁴ "Ellen Meets President Obama," *The Ellen Degeneres Show*, podcast video, 7:39, publication date: July 15, 2011, stable URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1newgZ9DgXQ>.

¹⁹⁵ "Barack Obama's Al Smith Dinner Speech: Jokes Aplenty," *abc NEWS*, podcast video, 9:28, publication date: October 19, 2012, stable URL: <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/video/barack-obamas-full-al-smith-dinner-speech-jokes-17517575>.

¹⁹⁶ Lauren Davis, "The Obama Family Reimagined as The Incredibles," *io9*, publication date: September 16, 2012, stable URL: <http://io9.com/5943649/the-obama-family-reimagined-as-the-incredibles>.

Showing Barack Obama in humoristic situations can bring him closer to the citizens. Americans may observe their president not only in political situations but also they can see him as a socializing and likable person. Charles E. Schutz in his book on political humor writes: “[...] humor is natural to politics, which can be understood as a kind of comic drama staged by society to aid in its governance.”¹⁹⁷ The voters may feel more connection to the politicians as they seem to be more real due to the casual situation in which the public persons appear. Witty answers, humoristic stories, or being able to laugh at themselves can be beneficial in gaining political support since this way one shows distance often forgotten in today’s world. Schutz enumerates different types of political humor and points out that successful ones may influence the political power.¹⁹⁸ Not only do the public speeches reveal a person’s sense of humor but also the general image created by the media.

Barack Obama is acknowledged in the comic book world as the fan of Spider-Man since he collects issues on the superhero.¹⁹⁹ Pete Souza, White House photographer, released the picture of president Barack Obama caught in the imaginary web by a little boy wearing the costume of the hero.²⁰⁰ The photograph was originally posted in TIME magazine but soon became recognized all over the world. Such picture may thaw out an image of a political person as it shows him or her in unusual for the viewer conditions. At the same time it focuses on presenting the politician as a warm person who loves children and is willing to show his positive attitude. Spider-Man is not the first comic book character around whom Barack Obama has pictures. When being a Senator of Illinois he

¹⁹⁷ Charles E. Schutz, *Political Humor: from Aristophanes to Sam Ervin* (New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1977), 25.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁹⁹ Jon Swaine, “Barack Obama: The 50 facts you might not know,” *The Telegraph*, publication date: November 7, 2008, stable URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/3401168/Barack-Obama-The-50-facts-you-might-not-know.html>.

²⁰⁰ “Obama Gets Caught In Spider-Man’s Web,” *HuffPost Politics*, last modified: December 20, 2012, stable URL: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/19/obama-spider-man_n_2330050.html.

posed for a photograph in Metropolis where in the background there was a Superman figure and Obama himself was trying to make the same pose as the superhero.²⁰¹

Due to the fact that the president is associated with comic books superheroes it came naturally that he became a protagonist of some comic books. Jonathan V. Last in his article enumerates the titles in which one may find Barack Obama, starting with IDW publishing house's issue from 2008. The most well-known when it comes to the president's appearances in comics is *Amazing Spider-Man #583*. In this episode Spider-Man is called a partner by Obama, which indicates the fact that both fight for justice and the good of the American nation. Marvel publishing house released this issue just a week before president's inauguration which turned out to be a huge marketing success. *Amazing Spider-Man #583* was sold five times more than any other issue which resulted in over 350,000 sold copies.²⁰² Jonathan V. Last reminds the reader that Obama is not the first president to appear in the comic book series, nevertheless he points out that it has been the first time when the head of the country appears on the cover and what is more, by this fact made the issue more wanted.²⁰³

What becomes visible is the fact that politicians tend to resemble celebrities nowadays. They appear in television shows or in the comic books, their images are printed on clothes, hence all these parts of social life make them included in celebrity culture. People want to be adored and they desire for fame.²⁰⁴ Due to this fact it becomes difficult to recognize the real person in them as they try to hide some traits of character and expose others in order to gain popularity.²⁰⁵ Of course, when it comes to politicians such behavior is often dictated by the reality we live in, in which one is recognized due to

²⁰¹ *Barack Obama Now*, blog entry: December 16, 2006, accessed June, 15, 2013, stable URL: <http://www.barack-obama-now.com/blog/?p=41>.

²⁰² Jonathan V. Last, "It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's... Obama" in *The Wall Street Journal*, July 10, 2009, accessed: June 10, 2013, stable URL: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124719493132621465.html>.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ Su Holmes, Sean Redmond, *Framing Celebrity. New Directions in Celebrity Culture*, (New York-London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

the media mostly. Even if the difference between being a celebrity and being famous exists²⁰⁶ one may observe that this border shrinks. The icons of pop-culture are often seen as mythic personages since they are introduced by the media, therefore they are thought to “have stepped out of the magic box to take on human proportions.”²⁰⁷

3.3. Political hero in contemporary America

Does the fact that Americans depict their president as a superhero mean that the country needs one? Could it be that the United States of America is overcoming the changes concerning role models as it tried so hard to prove that Barack Obama has the features of a superhero? One is obvious for sure, that the notion of a powerful man is strongly rooted in American tradition. *Watchmen* tells the story about fictional America where the need of having heroes was so strong, that they actually started to appear. However, the text focuses on the time when these heroes, who eventually turned out to be mostly ordinary humans dressed up as blessed creatures, started to be unwanted. This might resemble the recent situation of believing in the power of the candidate to presidential office. Americans glorified Barack Obama and made him resemble to Superman but as in the fiction by Moore, they soon started to dampen their enthusiasm.

Readers of the comic books tend to have been more dedicated to their superhero idols. Their words and deeds were to help Americans to believe in their country and reminded them of their ideals. People were to rely on their government and help in the actions that it proclaimed. However, what has changed with the passing of time when issues on superheroes were first published, is the enemy. Initially the antagonists were seen as extraterrestrial creatures, later by Soviets, Nazi, or any other nation that would threaten America but nowadays they turned into a villain that lurks within the country.

²⁰⁶ Danesi, 110-111.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 112.

The storyline of the comic books was different in the past as people were facing the dangers from the outside. Americans in today's world are more conscious when it comes to their safety that may be threatened by their country's politics. It seems that they look for a hero who would give them guidance, however they are not sure who this person should be, therefore option is divided.

Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals described the concept of a hero admitting that they did not expect so many psychological approaches to it.²⁰⁸ The research they conducted revealed that people who were asked to name some heroes usually pointed to the fictional characters, and what is more, they saw in them the only representation of this word. Moreover, when comparing fictional heroes to people from reality that were mentioned in the pool, it turned out that respondents had difficulty in qualifying real adventurers as good or bad heroes, whereas they answered without hesitation to the same query when being asked about fictional characters. The research showed as well that it is easy to point to the general features of a hero, and most people would name more or less the same adjectives. Nevertheless, the same respondents had problems when it comes to providing the names whose holders would fulfill this characteristic.²⁰⁹

Americans have been struggling with many financial problems concerning national debt, Medicare, or social security since the crisis of 2008.²¹⁰ The need of a hero to appear in America is evident. People know that something must be done but since they are also aware of the size of the problem they started to believe that a leader who would handle them has to have unusual power. They seek for a commander who would take care of the problems they can name. However, as the mentioned research showed, they have difficulties in agreeing on who this person should be. Barack Obama who proposed the

²⁰⁸ Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals, "The Seven Paradoxes of Heroism," *Society for Personality and Social Psychology*, publication date: January 2, 2012, stable URL: <http://spsptalks.wordpress.com/2012/01/02/the-seven-paradoxes-of-heroism/>.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Gerald F. Davis, "The New Financial Capitalism" in *Managed by the Markets: How Finance Re-Shaped America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.

solutions to American problems during his first presidential campaign appeared to many as a fictional superhero who would save the country. He seemed to be able to handle the problem, but the truth is that in real life an individual cannot do much without his or hers followers.

One of the other paradoxes concerning listing the heroes in the research by Allison and Goethals is the fact that people often forget to mention typical citizens who through their hard work render a service to society. These citizens are needed in every nation and facing the financial problems Americans should appreciate such people more. There is a tendency nowadays to include the stories of ordinary citizens into the programs where celebrities are invited. The shows present those who struggle with usually financial problems but they do not give up and even help others. They are seen as heroes and often their hard work is appreciated not only with the applause of the audience but they are given financial support as well. Of course, people picked to take part in such shows are only individuals, but it proves that Americans want to see stories about those who in the face of their own tragedies are still able to provide help to others in need. If they are able to appreciate the heroism of their fellow citizens they would certainly acknowledge a politician who would provide the sense of security to the nation.

Heroic figures concerning politics are often rooted in culture as tradition do not let to forget about them. The most recognizable seems to be the ones who were able to deal with problems in view of the possibility of danger within the country. The research on heroes also revealed that they emerged when some tragedies occurred.²¹¹ The same as with the superhero comic books which had their splendor years in the face of wars and political changes, real life heroes become more visible when they won over difficult times. After 9/11 for instance, the media focused on the survived or firefighters and medical service whose help was so important then. The tragedy united the nation who

²¹¹ Allison and Goethals.

gathered themselves in order to provide help. Ordinary people were described as brave and noble, which do not happen often. Probably the saddest result of the research conducted by Allison and Goethals is that when respondents actually pointed out to the real individuals when being questioned to name heroes, they mentioned mostly those who are dead. People often glorify political figures adding more to their real achievements. Hence, when encountering today's politicians their effort seems to be meaningless and therefore they are not perceived as heroes.

The conclusion of this research may be that people believe in, as Allison and Goethals put it, "intuitive heroism."²¹² What people usually think about the notion of a hero is not necessary what the truth is. The way in which individuals portrays heroes is dependent on the archetypes provided by one's culture. This might be the reason for portraying Barack Obama as Superman during his presidential campaign. It is intriguing that campaign specialists were counting on a fictional character to bring more voters for the candidate. Yet, it is difficult to answer whether the reason for this approach was dictated by the beliefs Superman represents, or the fact that people nowadays have problems in deciding on national heroes, as the research revealed.

Scott LaBarge also noticed that the heroes in whom people believe nowadays differ from the ones from the past. He finds it crucial for the society to form the choice of such splendid individuals. To LaBarge it is a matter of a great concern that teenagers asked about their heroes usually points either to celebrities, comic book heroes, or even the winners of music shows. He suggests that one should answer to himself or herself who the hero for us is, and find out whether the values represented by this person are to be found in us. LaBarge encourages teachers to introduce some important figures to their

²¹² Ibid.

students. He points out that everyone is a tutor in a way so it is not only the school's role to make sure that pupils would follow proper idols.²¹³

The article sums up the fact that Americans believe in certain heroes but what has changed over the years is that they cannot see idols in real people as they see them either in comic book superheroes or celebrities rather than in ordinary citizens or politicians. LaBarge sees the reason for this in growing cynicism among the society who face the scandals, like the ones concerning sportsmen. He finds the solution to this growing acrimony: "We need to separate out the things that make our heroes noteworthy, and forgive the shortcomings that blemish their heroic perfection."²¹⁴ Due to such division one may actually stick to the choice of a hero he or she made as real people make mistakes. Fictional characters from comic books may be good examples of role models but it has to be remembered that they will not step up from the stories in order to provide help. It seems that until the attitude towards the heroes in America changed, choosing a hero would be still a problem.

In today's modern world it is less likely to happen that a hero would appear given the evolution of men's need for greed and power. Nevertheless, such a wish exists in American society taking into consideration the growth of interest in superhero genre in Hollywood or comparing the President to the fictional characters who fight for justice. The times of World War Two showed that America needed comic book adventurers who reminded the country and the whole world that this is the land of heroes. The comics of Silver Age of the comic book history unified the readers and let them believe in American ideals. It proved that comic books can influence the process in which people cognize the world. America appeared to many as the metaphor of this great leader who would fight for justice in the world. With the publishing of *Watchmen* the idea of a superhero changed

²¹³ Scott LaBarge, "Heroism: Why Heroes are Important," *Santa Clara University*, accessed: July 15, 2013, stable URL: <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/publications/ethicsoutlook/2005/heroes.html>.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

or became shattered illusions. Now, a number of past superhero comic books are being turned into movies and they achieve a massive popularity. Americans are coming back to the stories from their childhood and it seems that they believe that a hero is to be found on the political arena.

Conclusion

Sequential art of present America in its second layer often provides themes concerning modern policies. The subjects discussed in particular issues reflect the vision of their authors on the society. As the history has proven, comic books have shaped the public opinion, whereas the notion of a hero they bring is strongly associated with the medium. It has been observed that Americans tend to relate the beliefs represented by

the protagonists of the cape genre to their leaders. This results in the feeling that there is a lack of great commanders in the real world, as nobody fulfills the expectations taken from the fictional narrative. Hence, people with extraordinary abilities are still to be found, and comic books about amazing characters have become popular again. First stories on superheroes have been reprinted and transformed into movies, which highlights their role in popular culture. In spite of the public outcry concerning the medium it was able to survive and, what is more, strengthen its position on the publishing market. Due to this fact, the characters of comic books are present in the social life of modern America, including the political arena.

Sadly, comic books still tend to be treated as low culture, especially by those who remember the claims from the 1950s. Superheroes became products recognized due to their contribution to the consumer world. Hence, it is still more common to associate a particular hero with his or her image, or the movie based on the comic book than on its original printed version. However, as the third chapter suggests, today's American sequential art has much more to offer than the figures of worn out protagonists. The drawings and plots of a number of comic books proved to have the potential of providing political and cultural subtext. The stories have become more complex, whereas the artistic tools used by their authors started to represent their individual style. Nevertheless, these are the comic books on superheroes which have been embodied in American culture the strongest, yet acknowledged all over the world. Even if the newest works of American sequential artists, which offer political subtext to the present issues, gain the interest of the readers, they seem to be underestimated by many not connected to the world of the comic books.

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