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Individualism and Marginality: From Comic Book to Film: Marvel Comics Superheroes

by Marino Tuzi

A certain strain of current cultural theory, vested with postmodern sensibilities, asserts that there is no true and stable subject position. That is to say, that one's consciousness of the world and one's experience of the world are not stable and unified. Consciousness is not only partial and fragmented but constantly reconstituting itself. There is no steady foundation other than the ability to be aware of elements in the world and to supersede imaginatively some of these elements, inventing new ones to take their place. If consciousness is an unreliable means to arrive at coherence and wholeness because of the nature of its operations, then self-identity is constantly subjected to instability and incoherence. Subjectivity is also de-stablized by the continual changing of social reality, a process in which certain sets of referents and structures are modified and new ones are introduced. Such a post-existentialist view of the world implies that consciousness is incapable of maintaining a unified sense of the world and that the world is both part and not part of consciousness. The individual can never attain an authentic, stable identity because the materials that make up identity are incomplete and in constant motion.

Of course, there are some cultural theorists who would decry this viewpoint as being not only limited but as presenting a "surface" description of social reality. Instead of critical analysis, this kind of postmodernism takes as its main referents the lifestyle qualities and media imagery of current consumerist capitalism, with its constant emphasis on newness and consumption. It derives its ideas about relentless change and multiplicity from the super-velocity of consumerist activity. Yet, despite the validity of such criticism, what this kind of existentially-oriented postmodernism does is invoke the qualities that are associated with the psychological conditions and responses to the existing social order. This social order has become increasingly individualistically based, with a free-floating array of referents in the place of definable community frameworks. If modern life is all about a set of individual relations enacted by and through a multitude of socioeconomic projects and personal interests that at times intersect but which are ultimately temporary, then self-identity must always remain a work in progress, never achieving stability or some kind of closure.

Given the lack of social stability and the multiple interests that social structures are supposed to serve simultaneously, there is the added challenge for people to deal with a social system in which there is no stable repertoire of social values and beliefs. Ethics and morality, what is deemed to be appropriate behaviour and notions of

right and wrong, are constantly changing, overlapping, and in contradiction with each other.

Many of these different strands of thought inform the philosophical viewpoint that underlies the plot lines and the character developments in various super-hero serials produced by Marvel Comic Books. Stan Lee, the creator of this giant comic books company, the original writers and artists, and their successors at Marvel Comics have given us a vision of human reality that is filtered though a particular popular culture genre, in which word and image coexist and even merge. This world view is saturated in a postmodern sensibility about individualism and the dilemmas confronted by individualism in modern capitalist, technological, consumer society. In this world, the Marvel super-hero becomes emblematic of a new kind of individualism that stands in that indefinable space between the margin and mainstream society. The hero is essentially presented as a misfit, as a social and scientific aberration, who is accidentally given super-human powers that are in conflict with and even undermined by the convulsions of his/her human personality.

Yet, this borderline existence is not just the condition of the often socially isolated and emotionally dysfunctional super-hero. Rather, marginality, as embodied by the psycho-neurotic super-human being, is reflective of a new kind of urban reality, in which individuals experience one another in terms of some kind of estrangement. As the Marvel pictorial texts imply, marginality, otherness, and fragmentation are not simply self-induced psychological states or the products of particular types of dysfunctional social conditioning. Instead, as many cultural theorists have speculated, isolation, self-repression, and confusion are the manifestations of a social system that is by definition coercive and anti-human, unconcerned for the most part with validating personal desire. The social system is primarily obsessed with forms of conformity and the management of social behaviour to ensure its survival against the inchoate resistance of its involuntary members. In order for the post-modern social system to remain intact, it must constantly redefine and reconstruct social and personal relations to the point that there is no longer any stable social core or coherent and consistent set of values. Conventional values and beliefs need to be destabilized through the assertion of social relativism so that they can be neutralized ideologically. As such, competing values and beliefs can become a matter of personal choice instead of being powerful explanations of the nature of social reality. The personalization of values and beliefs undermines established norms and values, creating a sense of insularity that permeates entire social organizations, such as family, community, government, and the marketplace. In this unfixed socio-cultural environment, small groups of individuals constantly move in and out of specific social arrangements depending on circumstance and self-interest.

Alongside this deeply anti-social, individualistic urban environment, there is the constant challenge posed by industrial technology, with its contradictory effects on human lives. This

problematic view of science and technology is represented in the Marvel universe in the accidental creation of super-human powers that disrupt the lives of the characters. Many of the characters have great difficulty in managing their supernatural powers so that these super-powers can be productive forces both personally and socially. Compounding the dilemma of what use such super-human abilities should be put to in a society composed of competing interests, there is the blurring of the boundary between good and evil. In this context, there is no clear definition of good and evil because human behaviour appears to be shaped by circumstance. The implication is that human nature is essentially a social construction. Attitude and action are constantly shaped by external forces and are not pre-determined biologically or metaphysically. The fluidity of ethical and moral definitions of human behaviour is dramatized by role reversals and the unpredictable transformations of personality. At times, destructive, evil super-mutants are rehabilitated and join the forces of good. On other occasions, well-meaning super-heroes are misunderstood or feared by the general population. Sometimes, these super-heroes unwittingly make terrible situations worse because they are unable deal with their own personal insecurities.

The archetypal Marvel Comics super-heroes, such as Spider-Man and the X-Men, have to cope not only with their social isolation as individuals and with the constant repression of their desires. They also must also deal with the fact that their super-hero activities are met with mixed responses from the people whom they are trying to protect from harm. This is not to say that Marvel Comics is the only comic book company that has presented an ambivalent and ambiguous view of heroism as part of the discourse on the nature contemporary social reality. Post-modernist writers, such as Frank Miller and Allan Moore, have worked for a variety of comic book houses, both established and independent. Frank Miller not only re-thought the conventional view of Batman in his Batman Returns graphic novel for DC Comics. Miller also revised for modern readers the Daredevil character for Marvel Comics. But it is the Batman Returns graphic novel that brought the Marvel Comics post-romantic sensibility to DC comics. In doing so, Miller helped to radicalize the conventional view of the super-hero. In the place of a simplistic, stereotypical rendering of the super-hero personality, Miller brought to the forefront of the comic book discourse an ambiguous, deeply troubled view of super-heroism. Frank Miller has also brought this austere depiction of the modern super-hero to independent comic book houses. The depiction of the super-hero as being anti-social, at times bordering on criminality, of having contradictory but essentially human qualities was a unique Marvel creation. This new kind of super-hero was much more common in Marvel comic books in the past than it was in DC comic books and other commercial comic book companies. Today, it appears that it is the Marvel post-modernist sensibility that has become pervasive in the comic book super-hero genre.

It is the Marvel idea of an anarchic individualism, of the reluctant

super-hero detached from mainstream society, that has resonance with contemporary film audiences. In this vision, the individual stands alone in society, ultimately unable to develop a solid set of social relations, and constantly facing the disintegration of self-identity, despite the fact that he or she has super-human abilities. The individual experiences a sense of selfhood, the individual knows that he or she exists in the world, through constant inner turmoil and by confronting insurmountable external threat. Victories against enemies are problematic and pent-up desires and longings remain unfulfilled. It is the experience of self as a dynamic in and of itself, without clear points of reference and any possibility of closure, that is invoked through conflict and suffering.

The two films, Spider-Man I and II, typify this angst-ridden depiction of the modern super-hero. Without reiterating the various plot lines of both films, I would like to look at the thematic moments that reflect a post-modern sensibility about the essentially unstable and fragmented nature of social reality. Peter Parker/Spider-man, the central character and super-hero, experiences various kinds of marginality. His only family member is his Aunt May, having lost his parents and his uncle. He is not part of a normal nuclear family and he does not have an extended family. His only friend is the son of the man whom he has been engaged in deadly combat with as Spider-man, resulting in the man's death. Equally, important is the fact that he cannot be with the only woman he has ever loved, Mary Jane Watson, a woman whom he has loved since childhood. Moreover, he has obtained his super-powers as the result of a bite from a radioactive spider, which is emblematic of the problematic nature of modern industrial technology. As a super-hero, his powers are at certain critical points not enough to ensure victory over his evil enemies, and therefore he is often defeated physically and at times comes close to death. Also, as Spider-man, he is vilified by the mass media and he is seen as acting outside the law by the police and justice system. Everywhere he turns to, both in his daily life and his role as a super-hero, Spider-man is in a constant state of crisis, unable to transcend the underlying forces that maintain his state of marginalization. Ultimately, he is an extremely self-conscious and self-judgmental individual who cannot develop a stable and unitary sense of selfhood. He clings to views and beliefs that are contradictory and which are contested by the external world. It is this state of confusion and his struggle to actualize his desires, especially his passionate love for Mary Jane, that often dominate his experience of the world.

This notion of marginality and constant struggle is repeated in the X-Men I and II movies. Again, the individual super-heroes are presented as orphans, as having no real family support system. This lack of family contributes to an overriding sense of isolation and simmering, personal desperation. Their super-human abilities have compounded their marginalization since they are perceived by society as non-human, as alien beings, as genetic mutations that have been caused by technological accidents or by disastrous laboratory experimentation. As a group, who are under the guidance and

tutelage of Prof. Xavier, the X-men and women have constituted a new sense of family among themselves. Yet, given their social isolation and emotional instability, these extra-ordinary individuals are often a threat to each other, unraveling the delicate set of personal relations that keep them together, allowing them to survive. In addition, they are unable to understand the nature of their desires and are engaged in constant inner struggle to actualize them. Most often, they repress the physical attraction and passion that they feel for each other. For instance, Wolverine longs in silence for Jane Gray, who is attached romantically to another X-man. Underlying this troubled and confusing emotional state is an ironic view of the world. This ironic stance is expressed in the fact that their enemies are mutants like themselves, who are lashing out against the world that has created them and which has rejected them. Moreover, the general population (whom the X-Men attempt to protect) perceives the mutant super-heroes to be indistinguishable from the evil mutants who are threatening society. Also the general population strongly distrusts the X-Men because these powerful individuals are biologically different from themselves.

Despite their tortured acts of altruism, despite their attempts to interact with the society they wish to protect as a means to experience their human qualities, the X-men and X-women, like Spider-man, constantly fail to achieve a fixed sense of identity. They are suspended ontologically between the margin and the mainstream. These post-modern super-heroes are unable to fully detach themselves from the world that has rejected them. They are unable to be part of the world that has instilled in them the emotions and desires that govern their existence.

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