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Stan Lee Revolution: Marvel's superheroes as an anticipation of the Dark Age antiheroes

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Abstract: The 1980s: The Superhero genre experiments the most significant transformation since the creation of Superman in 1939. A new age of superheroes begins, in which the funny characters for children become darker, violent, brutal, more and more realistic, disenchanted and adult. In *Supergods* Grant Morrison will call it Dark Age, when the antihero takes the superhero's place. The Dark Age is considered the biggest revolution in superheroes comics – and yet it is possible to see many warning signs during the Silver Age: a man – The Man – had already started to revolutionize the superheroes world: Stan Lee. Stan created dozens of characters: his superheroes are more complex and human than ever before. They are anticipating the Dark Age, twenty years before it. Thanks to some of the most iconic creations of The Man, this article will show the characteristic of these characters who anticipate the Dark Age's revolution.

Keywords: Antiheroes; Dark Age; Silver Age; Mask; Monster.

Revolução de Stan Lee: Os super-heróis da Marvel como uma antecipação dos anti-heróis da Idade das Trevas

Resumo: A década de 1980: O gênero Superhero experimenta a transformação mais significativa desde a criação do Superman em 1939. Começa uma nova era de super-heróis, na qual os personagens engraçados ficam mais escuros, violentos, brutais, mais e mais realistas, desencantados e adultos. Em *Supergods*, Grant Morrison vai chamar de Dark Age, quando o anti-herói toma o lugar do super-herói. A Idade das Trevas é considerada a maior revolução nos quadrinhos dos super-heróis - e ainda é possível ver muitos sinais de alerta durante a Era de Prata: um homem - O Homem - já havia começado a revolucionar o mundo dos super-heróis: Stan Lee. Stan criou dezenas de personagens: seus super-heróis são mais complexos e humanos do que nunca. Eles estão antecipando a Idade das Trevas, vinte anos antes. Graças a algumas das criações mais icônicas do The Man, este artigo mostrará a característica desses personagens que antecipam a revolução da Idade das Trevas.

Palavras-Chaves: Anti-heróis; Idade das Trevas; Idade de Prata; Máscara; Monstro.

Introduction

1986: two graphic novels sign a milestone for superheroes comics: Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*. They are the two most significant works of what Grant Morrison will call the *Dark Age* of the superhero genre. This age revolutionizes the superheroes world. New, disturbing characters appear and obtain incredible success: antiheroes. Hard, brutal, and at the same time, more realistic and complex characters dominate this period.

Although the *Dark Age* is seen as the age of revolution for the genre, we can already see the warning

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signs during the *Silver Age*. In those years when superheroes were forced to act in the shadow of the CCA (Comics Code Authority), an author had already begun to deeply transform the genre.

Before Moore and Miller's antiheroes, Stan Lee had already created superheroes who were more realistic, complex and human. His superheroes are not icons, perfect demigods who fly in the sky, but flawed human beings. They are not perfect, and they do not embody the supreme Good: they are more and more like us, fascinating precisely because they are imperfect, fallible.

The characters created by The Man anticipate those who will be the antiheroes of the next age. Inept, arrogant, naive, violent, jealous, characters like Spider-Man, Daredevil, the Fantastic Four, the X-Men are very far from the *Golden Age* flawless superheroes. They are no longer heroes, but outsiders, misfits, monsters.

This article highlights the elements present in some of Lee's most iconic creations which anticipate the antihero of the later *Dark Age*. Their physical and moral monstrosity, their morbid relationship with the "super" identity, the split with the society that sees them as freaks, their growing complexity and humanity – these are all elements that will later characterize the antiheroes, and that we can already find in Lee's superheroes.

Physical and moral monstrosity

The *Dark Age* sees the fall of superheroes. They are not the defenders of the higher Good anymore, beautiful and perfect demigods: on the contrary, they became problematic and controversial beings, even monstrous. Their monstrosity can be seen in their physical aspect, now far away from being the statuesque and perfect bodies of Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, and it also emerges in the moral of these new heroes, who become more violent and brutal. Stan Lee, already with his early works, anticipated all this.

One of Stan Lee's first creation (together with Jack Kirby) is a super-team: the Fantastic Four. Hit by cosmic rays during a space mission Reed Richard, Sue Storm, his brother Jonny Storm and Ben Grimm are transformed and get superpowers (LEE; KIRBY, 1961). A classic superhero origin story, if it was not for the tragic fate of Ben Grimm. While Reed, Sue and Jonny obtain superpowers and remain mostly human, Ben becomes a monstrous rock giant: The Thing. Superpowers, once a blessing, are shown by Stan as a terrible curse. The Thing can count on superhuman strength and semi-invulnerability, but the price he pays is high: physically, Ben Grimm completely loses his humanity. His body becomes a gigantic pile of rocks. The distance with the beautiful superheroes of the past could not be greater.

Bruce Banner shares a similar fate. Created by Lee and Kirby, Bruce is hit by gamma rays after a gamma bomb explosion. They deeply transform his body. The mutation is a terrible curse: like a modern Dr Jekyll, every night Bruce transforms himself into a monster, the Hulk (LEE; KIRBY, 1962). The difference between hero and monster disappears. While The Thing is still a hero – he is angry, but he still uses his power to defend the world – Hulk does not want to save humanity, he does not want to fight for "Truth, Justice and the American Way" like the classic superhero. He just wants to be left alone; this does not happen, and Hulk is forced to fight with other horrible creatures or with the US army that hunts him.

Hulk's monstrosity is not just physical: superhero's mission and morale disappear. Lee shows us a real monster. Hulk is not able to control himself; he is dangerous and destructive. He is not evil – he is often provoked; nevertheless, he is hugely problematic. Hulk will become the symbol of an intrinsic monstrosity:

he will later become the expression of Bruce's anger. He will no longer become the Hulk only at night, but every time he loses control.

Hulk shows us clearly the monstrosity that characterized the mythological hero, the hubris that made him look like the monsters he faces. In his analysis of the Greek Heroes, Angelo Brelich shows that the mythological hero always possesses horrific aspects: physical – like defects, mutation, excesses, weakness – and moral – like madness, bloodthirst, sexual violence, incest, unjustified destruction.² Mythological heroes are cause of devastation and death, exactly like the monsters they fight. Superheroes' monstrosity does not reach these extremes – nevertheless, it is directly connected with the mythological hero's hubris.

Lee's creation anticipated what will be one of the fundamental characteristics of the *Dark Age* antiheroes: violent, brutal, murders. In almost all of his works, there is a form of monstrosity, a physical or a moral flaw. His superheroes are freaks, outsiders. The X-Men: mutants who are not seen as heroes, and are even attacked and ghettoized, hunted like monsters. Spider-Man is seen as menace too. Tony Stark has a heart defect that forces him to wear always Iron Man's battery on his chest; Daredevil is blind, and his super-senses often torture him. Superpowers are, for all these characters, also a curse. While *Golden Age* superheroes represented human perfection, Stan Lee proposes the opposite: human being that, because of their powers, becomes imperfect and monstrous beings. "*From now on, having superpowers would come at the very least with great responsibility and, at worst, would be regarded as a horrific curse.*"³

Growing Humanity

While the "super" identity of these characters is more monstrous than before, their human side becomes more complex and realistic. One of the *Dark Age* essential element is the deconstruction of the superhero figure, which becomes more "adult" and is inserted in a realistic context. The characters become more controversial and problematic also because they become psychologically complex and more plausible. The concept of Good is no longer the *Golden Age*'s naive and superficial one, but is analysed and questioned, as the motivations of the characters, like their actions and their relationship with the society, are examined in depth.

Also, in this case, Stan Lee is a precursor. While, during the *Golden Age*, the adventures are about perfect and infallible superheroes, demigods, Lee revolutionizes the *Silver Age* by creating extremely human characters. No more aliens from the sky, playboy billionaires (except maybe Tony Stark), princesses of mysterious islands, but students who do not know how to pay rent, teenagers who are looking for a place in the world, ordinary families. Stan tells us stories of ordinary human beings who, suddenly, are transformed and obtain superpowers. Their human identity, although transformed and challenged by this mutation, remains the fundamental element. We do not see these superheroes only fighting monsters and villains, but also struggling with everyday problems, a feeling we also know well.

The Fantastic Four are not just a super-team. First of all, they are a family: Reed and Sue are the parents, Jonny is Sue's little brother, and he also has a fraternal relationship with Ben, who plays uncle's role. Their "normality" is highlighted by the absence – at first – of costumes and masks. On *Fantastic Four #1* the team wear simple everyday clothes.⁴ Fans will write to Lee and request costumes, a hallmark of

2 Cfr. Brelich Angelo, *Gli eroi greci. Un problema storico-religioso*. Adelphi, Milano, 2010.

3 Morrison Grant, *Supergods. What masked vigilantes, miraculous mutants, and a sun god from Smallville can teach us about being human*. Spiegel & Grau, New York 2012, p. 89.

4 Lee S., Kirby J., *The Fantastic Four #1*.

superheroes (HOWE, 2013, P. 38-39). They will be satisfied, but Lee gives the team uniforms without masks. Furthermore, the Fantastic Four identities are immediately public, thus breaking another convention of the genre, the secret identity.

Lawyer Matt Murdock, aka Daredevil, gives us another, incredible example of a new kind of superhero. Created by Stan together with Bill Everett, Matt is a normal human being. His force and agility are mainly due to intensive training. However, an element is added that makes Daredevil a unique character. Matt is blind. The radioactive accident that gives Matt his powers also blinds him (LEE; KIRBY, 1964). Probably it is the first time a superhero has a handicap of this kind: up to that moment, the standard was Superman, with super-force, super-hearing, super-strength, super-vision. The revolution is incredible. Matt has superpowers, but like before, they are more a curse than a blessing. The young Matt almost goes crazy because of the excess of auditory and olfactory stimuli that hit him. He will have to learn to control them, to live his new condition, and this is what makes him a more complex and human character.

Spider-Man is the most famous and successful superhero created by Stan Lee together with Steve Ditko. Peter Parker, a shy and awkward student, is bitten by a radioactive spider and suddenly gets the powers of a spider (LEE; KIRBY, 1962). He is probably the most typical example of the growing humanity in Stan Lee's characters. Peter is just a common boy: he reflects the typical comic reader, an introverted teenager, not particularly fit, clumsy. The most famous Marvel superhero faces everyday problems: how to pay the rent, how to find the time to study, he needs to find work, to take care of the old aunt, he struggles to ask a girl out. Peter's reasons are also extremely human: the classic superhero's mission is not "pure" like it was before. First, Peter uses his new superpowers to make money, not to help people. Only after his uncle gets killed, Spider-Man starts his altruistic fight against Evil. However, it is not pure altruism; instead, he is motivated by guilt.

Far from the *Golden Age's* demigods, the characters created by Lee become imperfect, weak, fallacious – in a word: more human. Precisely for this reason, their adventures become more compelling and heroic, but also more realistic, thus anticipating the deconstruction of the figure of the superhero that will follow in the *Dark Age*.

Relation with the society: Outsider

It has already been mentioned that the relation between the superhero and the society, becoming more realistic, also becomes more difficult. During the *Dark Age*, superheroes are also criminals: violent vigilantes without any right to fight crime instead of the official police forces. Also, the portray of the status quo changes itself: while during the *Golden Age* it was fundamentally "good", without corruption or contradiction, *Dark Age* antiheroes live inside a corrupt reality, where Good and Evil are not explicit anymore. Sometimes the status quo itself is the evil that the antihero wants to destroy – it happens for example in *V for Vendetta*. The society should not only be protected but also criticized and sometimes revolutionized.

The world of Stan Lee is not the dystopic one of the *Dark Age*; it is still the rightful society that superheroes can defend without questions. Peter Parker is sometimes bullied by his classmates: however, they are just harmless boasters, they are not "evil"; Peter's world is a microcosm made of terraced houses and carefree kids. Nevertheless, cracks begin to appear.

Stan Lee's superheroes are not acclaimed heroes anymore, collectively loved and celebrated: they are feared, hunted, even persecuted. "*Spider-Man: threat or menace?*": one of the many headlines on Daily

Bugle's front page, Jay Jonah Jameson's newspaper. "Who is Spider-Man? He's a criminal that's who he is! A vigilante! A public menace!" yells JJJ to his employees in *Spider-Man* by Sam Raimi (RAIMI, 2002). The army regularly hunts Hulk. The X-Men are hated and feared.

The society, although still good, is starting to be questioned. Superheroes face not only external threats but also social problems. If Spider-Man is a student with no money, forced to jump through hoops to pay for his aunt's medicine, the State is responsible too. Iron Man is the victim of a bomb in a foreign country, but it must not be forgotten that he was there to create weapons, commissioned by the same US army that hunts down Bruce Banner. Mutants suffer because of prejudices and discriminations. These problems are not addressed directly – the CCA would not allow it – but we begin to guess that, if ordinary citizens, however "super", put on their masks and fight crime, there are evidently inadequacies in society itself, no more so perfect and incorruptible as it was during the *Golden Age*.

"The ambiguity" wrote Umberto Eco, "appears when we ask ourselves-what is Good?" (ECO, 2016, P. 257) *Golden Age* superheroes get around the issue, by not addressing any controversial problem but limiting themselves to defend private property, to collaborate with the authority – which is always good and incorrupt – and to perpetuate the status quo. Threats are always external to society, enemy States, aliens, at least pathetic criminals from the slums. No ambiguity subsists because "good is represented only as charity." (Idem, p. 257-259), and the superhero is just a good citizen. Its fundamental ambiguity towards the law is ignored. Already in the *Silver Age*, thanks to the revolution started by Stan Lee, this ambiguity begins to be expressed, to appear even more evidently.

Superheroes cannot change the society, wrote Eco.⁵ Each new story "resolves nothing." (ECO, cit. P. 233). Antiheroes are different: during the *Dark Age*, characters like V or Ozymandias succeed to revolutionize their world. At the end of the graphic novels *V for Vendetta* or *Watchmen*, there is not a return to the previous status quo, rather a transformation of it.

Stan Lee follows the strict rule of superheroes comic books, the illusion of change.⁶ Nothing should really happen. Nevertheless, with the growing tension between superheroes and society, there will be a breaking point. The status quo will be challenged.

Between the characters created by Stan Lee, the most representative of this increasingly problematic relationship with society are undoubtedly the X-Men, created together with Kirby. The mutants of the Marvel universe are not the typical superheroes. The same crowds that cheer the Fantastic Four insult the X-Men, who are hunted and ghettoized. The main task of this supergroup is not only to protect society but also to promote the integration of humans and mutants – thus partially transforming the status quo. The X-Men anticipate a typical characteristic of the *Dark Age* antihero, the challenge to the status quo, which no longer appears as a good, rightful and incorrupt. On the contrary: it is bigoted, racist, dangerous. The threats no longer come from outside to disturb a perfect order, but are generated within the society itself, proof of its flaws. We are not yet facing the dystopias of the *Dark Age*, but the difference from perfect Superman's American Way is abysmal. Through the X-Men, it is possible to see a reality that is no longer just to be protected, but to be transformed.

The Mask

The relationship with the mask and the secret identity is another main difference between superhero and antihero. The first one remains in a liminal state, always balanced between the human identity and the

5 Cfr. Eco Umberto, *Il superuomo di massa. Retorica e ideologia nel romanzo popolare*. Bompiani, Milano 2015. P. 90.

6 Cfr. HOWE, P. 101.

super one. He is still bound up to the society in which he acts. His human side makes him a hero because it enables his perspective of the world to never slide away from the common persona. Staying split between the mask he has created and the human world, allows him not to be in conflict with the society but to be, in its eyes, a kind of protector, a hero.⁷

Villains and antiheroes, on the other hand, give up their “normal” identity, fully embracing the new persona they chose to be. Both of them do not perceive in reality any other sense beyond the one they chose. Their only identity has become the mask. Characters like V or Rorschach are emblematic: the first one never takes off his iconic Guy Fawkes’ mask, the second has a morbid relation with his mask, he calls it “my face”.⁸

During the *Silver Age*, the conflict between society and Marvel’s superheroes is not extreme; however, the growing complexity reflects itself also in the relationship with the mask. Stan Lee’s characters do not embrace their super identity completely, like the later antiheroes will do. Nevertheless, their relationship with the mask becomes more morbid and problematic than before. Hulk and Bruce Banner literally fights against each other. The two identities show a real schizophrenic relationship: Bruce cannot control his alter ego, Hulk completely takes Banner’s place every time he appears. Spider-Man too is continuously tormented by doubts about who he is. He even arrives to abandon the mask in the narrative arc *Spider-Man no more*, written by Stan Lee and designed by John Romita Sr. (which inspired Raimi for the film *Spider-Man 2*).⁹

With other characters, the double identity, hallmark of the superhero up until that moment, disappears. The Fantastic Four have public identities, they are not in the liminal state typical of the superhero, but their “super” life and the civil one are mixed up – at the beginning they do not even wear a costume! Also, in the case of the X-Men, the mask almost disappears, and the two identities start to become one. The mask is part of their being on a biological, genetic level. Nightcrawler, Beast, Colossus, Angel, the Ice Man: they do not need masks or uniforms to express their super identity. It is expressed, sometimes inevitably, directly from their body: Angelo has two enormous wings that he can barely hide, Ice Man can transform his body entirely into ice.

Lee’s creations, in their relationship with the mask, are not yet antiheroic. However, they anticipate the morbid relationship that characterizes Moore’s and Frank Miller’s antiheroes, without a human identity, completely transformed into their mask.

7 The double identity is one of the most distinctive elements of the superhero. Peter Coogan defines it as “the clearest marker of the superhero genre” (Coogan P., *The hero defines the genre, the genre defines the hero*. In: Rosenberg Robin S., Coogan Peter (Edited by) *What is a superhero?* Oxford University Press, New York 2013, P. 6), according to his analysis it is composed of two constituents: costume and codename. This definition, as it stands, it is not truly suitable for superhero comics because Coogan leaves out the dual aspect itself which defines de facto the superhero. Antiheroes and Villains use codenames and costumes too, but they do not have a double identity: they do not have a mask, this is the case of the Punisher or Lex Luthor – or they do have a mask, which however has become their only one identity, for example Joker, V, Rorschach. It is no coincidence that when the superhero starts to approach nearer the antiheroism or the criminal dimension, the distance between the two identities decreases. The double identity allows the superhero to stay in the liminal state, to be human and superhuman, hero and criminal. Such an example can be found in the story of Frank Miller, *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller Frank, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. DC Comics, Burbank, 1986).

8 Cfr. Moore Alan (Writer), Gibbons Dave (Artist), *Watchmen*. DC Comics, Salem 2014 and Moore Alan (Writer), Lloyd David (Artist), *V for Vendetta*. VERTIGO/DC Comics, New York 2005.

9 Lee Stan (Writer), John Romita Sr. (Artist), *Amazing Spider-Man Vol 1 #50*. Marvel Comics, July 1967. *Spider-Man 2*, Raimi Sam, USA 2004.

After Stan Lee

Stan Lee passed away in November 2018, mourned by millions of fans all around the world. The purpose of this article is also to pay a tribute to him, showing how his genius radically changed the world of superheroes, influencing the *Dark Age's* revolution from which the contemporary superheroes will arise.

Superheroes, villains, antiheroes: distinguishing them is becoming increasingly difficult. The characters' growing complexity and realism make impossible perfect heroes and evil monsters. The modern superheroes universe is populated by extremely human characters, profound and multi-faceted, more anti-heroic precisely because they are more realistic than before. We also owe this to The Man. We have seen how in their relationship with the mask and with the society in which they find themselves, the characters created by Stan Lee, from the beginning, are more complex than the previous ones. The status quo itself begins to be problematized, and it is no longer the good and perfect society of the *Golden Age*.

The characters are on the one side more human, on the other more monstrous: their super identity is no longer a blessing but a curse, an inhuman monstrosity that forces them to separate from society. However, while the super identity becomes monstrous, the human side also evolves, becoming more multi-faceted, real. The problems that Spider-Man, the X-Men, Daredevil, Hulk and the Fantastic Four have to face are not only those of demigods but they are everyday problems, those of us all: study, work, find a place in the world, understand who someone is.

Stan Lee is, without a doubt, one of the founding fathers of the modern superhero universe. Thank you, Stan! Excelsior!

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