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The Comic Books between Fantasy, Science-Fiction and Politics

ABSTRACT

This article presents an insight into the relations two of the main genres in popular literature, namely science-fiction and fantasy, establish with the medium of comic books. In the first part of the article these two genres are put face-to-face, and some similarities as well as important differences between them, which are necessary in any discussion on the topic, are exposed. Although their approach to the same major issues is similar, and although they address almost the same public, the main differences are related to their dealing with science and technology, respectively with magic. The second part of the article investigates the presence of the science-fiction and fantasy trends in comic books, as well as occasional symbioses of the two genres. The most influential creations in the field are not just good entertainment products or works of art, but they are relevant from political, sociological, cultural and philosophical points of view.

KEYWORDS

Science-Fiction; Fantasy; Comic Books; Mass-Media; Popular Culture; Entertainment; Imagination.

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To tell a well made story
is to move up the social scale.
Priests and poets have often dominated
soldiers and stonemasons.
(Erik S. Rabkin)

There was a time when
all literature was fantasy.
(Peter S. Beagle)

Introduction

In the studies devoted to the comic books (shortly and commonly referred to by the fans as “*comics*”) there are several major research directions. These cultural products can be analysed from a technical point of view, by way of exploring their artistic profile, the attributes they share with other forms of art or the ones that make them unique and relevant (comic books have been accepted as a form of art, “the ninth art”, as they are often called, although they have suffered long and harsh detractions from cultural philistines, still being considered a minor and “childish” form of expression by many authoritarian voices of the cultural establishment¹). Another direction of study follows their narrative content, the epic substance of the stories “told” by this genuine



entwining of drawings and letters, efforts which fall under the incidence of literary criticism. They can also be evaluated as a distinct mass-media channel, underlining their contribution to communication development, keeping in mind that they have appeared during the 19th century in American newspapers. From a historical perspective, the study of comic books offers valuable insights regarding the social and cultural effects of political decisions and trends². Of course, economic inquiries are also useful in the study of comic books, since in some cases the industry producing them reaches enormous size and influence³. Even though it would seem that everyone knows what comic books are and where to place them in the cultural landscape, a definitive and unanimously accepted definition is not yet functional, mainly due to their resemblance to other forms of art (they “manifest at the intersection of text, image and sequence”).⁴

In analyzing the narrative content of comic books, it is of great importance that initially they deal with easy humour, with frivolous subjects in the attempt to offer mild and non-problematic drawn jokes for the urban American working public, making fun of the suburban middle-class family life and habits. In this respect, even if the drawing was caricatured, they were less pungent than caricatures, lacking the irony, the cynicism or the social and political implications the latter traditionally contained. In short time, the entertaining potential of this particular technique of telling stories, together with the rather unpretentious logistics it required (considerably less than movies or animated cartoons) imposed it as the main entertaining medium in the United States for at least three decades, until the introduction of home television for the public. Aiming mainly at easy profit, the artistic or philosophical dimension of *comics* was almost absent, in spite of some undeniably highly aesthetic pages signed by Opper, Dirk, Fisher or

McCay. Thematically, comic books took the fashionable subjects of the time from what is widely known as *pulp-fiction*: cheap, abundant and poorly written, but sensationalist small stories which insisted on tales of adventure, crime, suspense and mystery. The first characters which migrated from pulp literature to the *comic* medium were *Tarzan* and *Buck Rogers*, shortly followed by *Dick Tracy*, *Flash Gordon* and *The Phantom*⁵.

Comic books imposed themselves as a major influence on popular culture once they have introduced a certain type of character, which started an unexpected, huge, almost hysterical wave of sympathy from the American (and in really short time, global) public: the superhero. The first to suddenly appear in the constellation of worldwide adulated imaginary characters was Superman, initially published in 1938 by the DC publishing house, but created in 1933 by Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, two teenage friends of Central-European Jewish descent. It is crucial to acknowledge the fact that once they introduced the superhero, comic books practically became synonyms with super-heroic tales, playing a major role in the shaping of 20th century American mentality (they perfectly portrayed the policy of American exceptionalism, doubled by a messianic complex at the level of a whole society, a principle found at the sheer basis of the American nation, which is valid today as it always was). Even if the super-hero was built following the model of hero found in the popular novels and the short-stories of the late 19th century (detectives, cowboys, soldiers, etc.⁶), the hero of the 20th century had to be “super”, more than human, in order to blend in the trend of a fast industrializing, consumerist, mobile and communicative society functioning on hyperbolic imagery.

The immediate success super-heroic stories had and the considerable wealth they



produced in short time, generated an incredible emulation trend which affected other media channels, such as radio broadcasts, animated cartoons, and later television programs, movies, and in the new century, the immersive virtual spaces of computer games. Although the super-heroic genre is just one segment of the comic book production, it is one aspect they excelled at and anywhere it appears, the super-hero is known to have issued from drawn pages, carrying into other types of media or art not only the characters, the epic context or the identity “trademarks”, but also narrative stereotypes, the construction of such stories following similar (if not identical) tropes, pacing, reflexes and even expectations, in any channel they find expression. A story told in comic books possesses unique traits and certain stories are perfectly fit for this medium (proving that for creating a good comic book it is not sufficient to know how to draw, but to be able to tell a good story in certain parameters, the scriptwriter being, from the narrative point of view, the most important actor in the process). Inevitably, acclaimed comic book stories or characters transgressed the medium (and I dare say that not always the idea of profit was the only decisive factor), succeeding in coagulating what I would call “trans-media imaginary spaces”, in which certain conventions, habits or signs were operational, and around which bigger or smaller fan groups orbited. And since a powerful work of art (be it literary or visual) is never “just” art⁷, but (progressively or suddenly) gains social, political, economic or cultural relevance, it is no wonder that comic books became highly influential, mostly in the American space (some authors go as far as asserting that comic books are the main mentality-forging instance for the American public, Bradford Wright using a somewhat pungent but well-defended concept when he puts the title

Comic Book Nation on one of his own books).

It has become commonplace in public perception to consider every super-hero story, expressed in any form, as belonging to the science-fiction genre. Most of the times, this categorization is obvious, or at least not surprising, since the most part of these characters illustrate “classical” themes of science-fiction paradigm: extraterrestrial origin, space and time travels, a certain use and description of technology, biological mutations, etc. However, it could generate doubts when only “self-made heroes” were involved, characters which had reached super-heroic status by their power of will and individual effort (to put it colloquially, why would Batman belong to the science-fiction genre – just because one of his good friends, namely Superman, came from another planet?). This article aims at presenting some considerations regarding the science-fiction and fantasy vine in comic books, the specificity of each, and some innovations the comic book narrative strategies and ideas brought to the larger SF and fantasy imaginary spaces.



Science-fiction and fantasy

From a narrative point of view, in the entertainment industries of today the science-fiction and fantasy segments are considered rather close to one another, addressing the same public in terms of age, occupation, or education level (as opposed to romance or detective stories, for example, which have developed their own techniques and strategies). As fields in which grandiose, detailed, completely immersive imaginary spaces are created, both science-fiction and fantasy determine huge fandom phenomena, and therefore lifestyles (with social, economic and, why not, political implications). These two important fields of the last century's popular culture are dealing with the same major issues, taken from other cultural fields (which benefit from greater authority and recognition, such as philosophy, theology or sociology): the question of the origins, the eschatology, the immortality, the infernos, the question of evil, etc.⁸

In fact, Leslie Fiedler made an intriguing remark in 1983, in a time when studies and classes dedicated to the various forms of popular culture were still being frowned at in academic fields, stating that we experience Stapledon's *Star Maker* (one of the most loved and praised science-fiction novels)

“scripturally”, as perhaps unintended but quite valid “Scripture”, that is, as the mythological statement, accepted on faith, of a grid of perception through which we see or aspire to see the world and ourselves. Much popular literature, in our time, especially science fiction and fantasy, is read like this; and therefore eventuates not in ethical enlightenment or a heightened appreciation of virtuosic form, but in transport, ecstasy, a radical transformation of sensibility,

thus permitting us to transcend momentarily the normal limits of consciousness and escape the ennui of routine awareness, the restrictive boundaries of the unitary ego.⁹

The author continues the argument with other strong remarks, which are worth nothing here, because they have opened a debate never quite settled since:

another way to say this is that we respond to SF even at its most sophisticated, as we respond to fairy tales (at a level where, like children, we have not ceased to feel at home with the marvelous), and not as we do either to mimetic or self-reflexive formalist fiction. It is, therefore, essentially for their mythopoeic power, their ability to create or evoke the primordial images which trigger such ecstatic releases, that we prize the best-loved makers of science-fiction, rather than for their ethical import and metaphysical insight, their architectonic skill or linguistic subtlety¹⁰.

Fiedler considered science-fiction, fantasy and comic books as three types of storytelling, sharing the same low position in the cultural establishment, but we observe that he rather mistook the medium for the narrative substance (comic books can present science-fiction or fantasy stories, but also stories of other genre, while SF and fantasy can also find expression in other media).

Adam Roberts also proposes a daring theory, one which may appear far-fetched at a superficial glance, but that is cognizant of cultural inheritance. He thus finds the origin of science-fiction stories in Greek Antiquity, with its fantastic voyages so naturally abundant in a culture defined by mobility, travel, exploration and interaction¹¹. From



these tales of fantastic travels and encounters was born what he considers to be the source of all science-fiction epic: space-travel, with its two main aspects, the voyage upwards, to the stars, and the voyage downwards, to the core of the Earth. From this main flux of “scientific” imagination, a second great segment of science-fiction has developed: the travel through time, again in two directions, to the past and to the future. A third type of science-fiction story also developed as a corollary to the space-travel: the stories about technology and its various aspects. He also considers utopian fiction a fourth type of science-fiction “although it takes its starting point in philosophy and social theory”¹². This categorization may be accepted or amended, but what intrigues most in Adam Roberts’s study is the assumption that scientific fantasies, after being absent from European culture for more than a millennium, literally exploded in a time when scientific researches and ideas became strong and progressive during the Renaissance. He links it closely to the Protestant Reformation, which determined the shifting of scientific enquiry to Protestant countries, where ideas that “might be perceived as contrary to biblical revelation could be undertaken with more (although not total) freedom”¹³. Events like the condemnation of Galileo’s work by the Catholic church and mostly the execution of Giordano Bruno in 1600 greatly influenced scientific research and by consequence, scientific speculation (the unpardonable “mistake” of the latter being the suggestion that there were a multitude of inhabited world in the Universe). Furthermore, this secession of the scientific paradigm following religious frames forged the imaginative trends, as the author puts it:

[...] to a Protestant imagination (or to a sceptical humanist Catholic imagination, such as Descartes’ or Voltaire’s)

the cosmos expands before the probing inquiries of empirical science through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the imaginative-speculative exploration of that universe expands with it. This is the science-fiction imagination, and it becomes increasingly a function of western Protestant culture. From this SF develops as an imaginatively expansive and (crucially) materialist mode of literature, as opposed to the magical-fantastic, fundamentally religious mode that comes to be known as Fantasy¹⁴.

Roberts considers the most applauded and influential fantasy construction, Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, as a “profoundly Catholic work”, a “drama of fall and redemption, in which a saviour returns to overthrow evil”¹⁵. The difference between science-fiction and fantasy-fiction would reside then, in his opinion, in the latter’s involvement of tales “of fantastic or non-realist form in which the mechanism for the fantasy is magic rather than technology”¹⁶. To (drastically) simplify, the Protestant paradigm, which aimed at clearing the world and faith of magic and mystery, valorised rational scientific inquiry, doubled by speculations about technology. On the other hand, the Catholic tradition kept at high value the mystery of life and belief, together with the fantastic (or “non-realist”) fiction, and it produced, over time, traditional romance, magical-Gothic, horror, Tolkienian fantasy and Marquezian magical realism¹⁷. The historical definition Roberts builds following this distinction in religious and cultural ambient describes science-fiction as “that form of fantastic romance in which magic has been replaced by the materialist discourse of science”¹⁸. It is to be noted though that Roberts rejects the crude identification of science-fiction with science and of fantasy with magic (in fact he exposes a



series of great SF productions which represent the “Catholic” trend), stressing upon the fact that being “magical” is not what differentiates fantasy from science-fiction, but being “sacramental”¹⁹ (and to avoid the sectarian distinction Protestant versus Catholic traditions, he suggests the dialectical pair “deism” and “magical pantheism”).

One needs to recall to mind here Jean-Bruno Renard’s idea, who asserts that even though initially science-fiction was the mark of the triumph of rationality, forcing itself within the borders of logic (a certain logic, apparently scientific), and even if it demystified religion in an agnostic or atheist frame, it also pointed at the “cracks” through which the irrational and the mystique finds itself the way back into the world.²⁰ Consequently, science-fiction always oscillates between demystifying allegories and irrational mythologies, getting close to fantasy in vital contact areas, such as the major themes of origin and eschatological myths, immortality, infernos, the question of evil, as pointed out before.

Both of these genres (for the sake of the argument, we won’t follow here the path of debating whether they can even be considered distinct and autonomous genres) escape thorough and definitive definitions, and even “mock the elaborate classification systems of academia that have grown up around”²¹ them. It is true that Fantasy and “its young, empirical stepchild, science fiction”²² have become two of the most popular genres and often chosen by authors as “the most direct, immediate, and challenging mode of expression available to them”²³. Peter Hunt puts it clearly that of

types of fiction, fantasy is where the initial impulse of the writing and the constraints of genre clash more strongly. Personal, private, fantasy allows us to speculate, to explore possibilities, to indulge our private selves – to consider

imaginatively things that cannot be (as opposed to speculation on things that *might* be, which produces science fiction); it would seem to offer worlds of infinite possibility, of expansiveness, of liberation²⁴.

Beyond all theoretical conundrums and debates, it is clear that fantasy and science-fiction dominated a huge segment of popular and media culture during the 20th century, and influenced the general public’s sensibility towards certain issues such as technology, time, otherness and maybe first of all, individual responsibility. If science-fiction goes side by side with scientific and technological progress, covering larger areas of inquiry and speculation, fantasy would “react” at the same amount, filling the natural human need of imaginatively endowing places, characters, items or words with mystic and mysterious valences. Neither fantasy nor science-fiction are “second-hand” literature or art, at least not less than any other field, and the huge mass of rather minor productions come as an expectable result of the creative process. But one cannot ignore or downgrade absolute masterpieces coming from both trends, classical oeuvres created by Tolkien, le Guinn, Lewis, Dick, Asimov, Vonnegut, Lem or the Strougatski brothers. They are considered products of fantasy or science-fiction just because they are stereotypically placed in such areas, but the issues they deal with are philosophically, socially, anthropologically or politically relevant, not talking about the aesthetic dimension, which some of them fulfil gloriously. And, as Krut Vonnegut has put it, the novels that (nowadays) avoid technology give a wrong image of life, just as the Victorian writers did when describing life by completely ignoring sex²⁵.



Science-fiction and comic books

Comic books became a relevant media channel in the late 19th century, one deeply rooted in, and an expression of, popular culture. They have continuously developed their technical aspect, occasionally reaching masterpiece status, proving to be a strong, rich and mobile cultural field. On the other hand, their narrative content varied much less, the stories, the themes, the tropes and even the stereotypes returning with almost obsessive frequency. Thus, if they started out in the mode of mild satire and easy humour, comic book creators soon envisaged the profit potential of these graphic narrations and adopted the trendy subjects, those present in pulp-fiction: adventure, mystery, crime, and even horror tales, which offered the opportunity of simple, fast and unpretentious plots. With the introduction of the superhero, in his very first instance as Superman, comic books became more than a profitable business, an entertainment medium or a certain (yet perceived as dubious by the cultural establishment) art form: a mentality-forgery. Of course, this is mostly valid in the American case (but very often the discussion about *comics* refers to the American scene), where comic books were always carrying social and political signals, their obvious feat during the so-called *Golden Age*, which covers the Great Crisis with its applauded New Deal and the Second World War.

The introduction of science-fiction scenarios into comic books or graphic novels (a term created for more “pretentious” *comics*, usually graphic adaptations of acclaimed mainstream novels) offered an even wider horizon for imagination and speculation. At the beginning, science-fiction themes were rather shy in the medium, consisting of few (and sometimes accidental) elements, such

as the extraterrestrial origin of some characters or various technological aspects (weapons, tools, etc), but in short time they grew more and more relevant, until becoming the most important theme in comic books. Due to the rather low cost of production and to the visual advantage (more explicit and direct, and less abstract than the written text), it comes less as a surprise that comic books became one of the most favourable mediums for exposing science-fiction stories.

During the troubled period of the Second World War, *comics* played an important role in raising the morale of American soldiers, and therefore some characters, events and places depicted found their motivation in the historical reality, although ideologically manipulated (Superman grabs both Hitler and Stalin and takes them to the International Court in Geneva in 1940²⁶, before the United States even entered the war; Captain America makes his debut by punching Hitler in the face in March 1941, etc). The war economy was truly a gold-mine for comic books business, which fell dramatically after that, people trying to get away from war-themed materials and rebuild a peaceful way of life, where strife-based stories did not fit. Therefore, during the fifties, humour and romance comic books got a new boost, followed by other popular types, such as western *comics*, jungle *comics* or detective *comics*. But the new anxieties of the Cold War, with the fear of the atomic apocalypse and the many crises (the Korean War being the most known), also affected the comic book industry, causing creative reactions against the “American dream” and the moral condescending certainties of the western societies, pointing out the flaws of this established order: racism, social inequalities, political corruption, ethnic exclusion, justice inefficiency. Crime *comics*, new war *comics* and even horror *comics* exposed such tales addressed directly to the young public, and not to their



tutors, being the first cultural channel that contributed to the creation of a “youth culture” in the Occident (rock and Hollywood followed).

Science-fiction covered a large and important segment of comic book creation during this period, offering, beyond the usual genre stereotypes, new pretexts for social, political and philosophical speculation. The new discovered worlds, the new creatures and the new adventures raised new questions, one of the most troubling being “what if humans (meaning Westerners, and more specific, Americans) are not supposed to always win?”. Catastrophic scenarios of atomic showdowns fuelled the diffuse paranoia of Western societies during the Cold War. Even humour was calibrated to the ideological requirements, introducing sometimes explicit references to the geopolitical setup (for example, the new very successful team of heroes *The Fantastic Four* had to fight many times in order to prevent soviet spies stealing strategic American secrets, while Spiderman referred to a character as being “more antipathetic than Kroutchev” during the Cuban missile crisis, etc.). When the stories took the characters further away from the “recognizable” Earth context, into different worlds or times or dimensions, basing themselves more and more on pure imagination, they offered excellent escapist scenarios, but lost the social and political relevance.²⁷

Apart from sheer games of imagination, in which the only purpose was to invent new races, places or events, without a greater aim other than entertainment (and apart of huge but often boring, tiring or simply dull constructions known as space-operas), in science-fiction one could always find reflections of the main issues of the social and cultural context in which they were produced, and also influences of cultural trends and tastes. This is also noticeable in science-fiction comic books, which influenced,

in their turn, trends and tastes, from fashion and attitudes to verbal reflexes (“my spider-senses are tingling”, “who do you think you are, Superman?”, “don’t hulk up over it!”, etc)²⁸. During the sixties, the troubled, yet fascinating decade of the youth movements, teenage rebellion, feminist and pacifist meetings, the debate penetrated the drawn pages of *comics*. If some well known characters still represented the establishment (Superman, Batman), in an interventionist and rather condescending manner, others turned “popular” (if not “hippie”), like Spiderman²⁹, while some new and irreverent characters were introduced to support different issues and perspectives (we only need to mention *Barbarella*, the feminist, blonde, French – obviously – space explorer and sexual liberator, created in 1962 by Jean-Claude Forest, and turned into an unforgettable influential icon once her image was transposed to the big screen in 1968 in a Roger Vadim movie, starring the mesmerizing Jane Fonda – obviously).

Comic book creators became aware of their power over the general public and their art became more and more responsible, neat and relevant. Explorations of technical and textual aspects resulted in not a few really high-art graphic stories (at the same time, some authors tried to make it a completely culturally legitimized field, therefore creating pages overfilled with laborious intellectual strata and almost indecipherable graphics, which did not bring more respectability to the genre, because if comic books, and science-fiction in general, ignore their entertainment value, they lose their main point of attraction). The most loved titles kept their grip on “real context”, so to speak, bringing acute issues in their narrations, throughout the eighth and the ninth decades of the last century. Homelessness, unemployment, ethnic exclusion, drug use, illiteracy, teenage crime, alcohol abuse, domestic violence,



they were all dealt with in direct or allegorical manners, good stories managing to send serious messages without being irritatingly didactic (in fact a message is more efficient if it is attractive in form). Comic books were also permeable to other media (and I say it again, not only due to profit-based reasons), participating in the creation of large “trans-media imaginary spaces” (or worlds). For example, two of the most complex and large imaginary narrative constructions the world has ever produced (the phenomenon is not at all without relevance, since millions of people and billions of dollars got swept in these virtual worlds), the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* series, had their huge share of comic book production. Offered to the public almost at the same time (*Star Trek* has a temporal anteriority of not even a decade), they have developed side-by-side, giving perfect examples of permanently ongoing and developing imaginary spaces, built by various media channels, such as big screen movies, TV series, comic books, animated cartoons, popular novels and short-stories, and lately computer games (and even music – who is the person who could not recognize the *Star Wars* themes?). So many people have contributed to these edifices, coming from so many fields (there are films, written stories, *comics* or various little theme-connected items created by the fans, following the specific ethos) that they can truly be considered the present-day Arthurian cycle or Homeric epopees. Apart of their differences (*Star Trek* valorising multiethnic dimensions and team-work, while *Star Wars* being all about individual heroes, etc), it is beyond any doubt that their influence surpassed that of any singular media channel, becoming more than entertainment products (although their entertainment value is maximum).³⁰

Even stronger taboo subjects penetrated into the comic books pages and it may be said that the science-fiction paradigm

favoured that, due to its hypothetical and speculative codes. In the seventies, homosexuality became a talked issue in mainstream *comics* (it had been a major satiric point in underground *comics*, in the works of artists like Crumb). Inevitably, AIDS followed, showing that not even super-heroes could escape that unknown viral *hydra* (lesser heroes, of course, the major ones remaining as they had always been: straight and monogamous, a-sexual, to be more precise).

Dystopian scenarios pointed out at the risks of power abuse and irresponsible use of force. Beside the super-technological future of the “clean” *Star-Trek* saga, derelict versions of the future exposed chaotic post-apocalyptic worlds and humans returned to the barbaric stage, following a *Mad Max* setting (series such as *Hex* or *Judge Dredd* being much appreciated)³¹. Another extreme, but perfectly carried out project which has it distinguished place in any topic related to science-fiction was *Metal Hurlant*, a French magazine debuting in 1974. The fructuous “marriage” between SF and *comics* was explicit in these magazines, and the daring stories, written or drawn, covered hard-SF themes, but also strange horror and erotic tales addressed to an adult audience in an age when the tastes turned more aggressive, the post-hippy age (hard rock, heavy metal, punk and later thrash metal took over and forged identities for the ninth decade of the century)³².

The eighties were definitely the cyberpunk years, drastically dominated and fashioned by Gibson’s *Neuromancer*. Comic books did not let the opportunity go and exploited this trend. Maybe the most appreciated title dealing with these issues was the already classical *X-Men*, in which the dangers of uncontrolled technology threatened the entire humanity. In fact, the longevity and the success of the *X-Men* series is the result of their openness to important



mainstream topics, still being today one of the most appreciated and consistent *comic* titles. The eighties were also marked by the *Watchmen* short series (12 issues) written by Moore and drawn by Gibbons, considered by many the best *comic* series ever (and maybe rightly so). The most rewarded writer in comic book industry, Allan Moore, pushed the narrative, the aesthetic and the philosophical potential of comic books to the maximum, proving once and for all that this particular medium does not need reasons to exist and manifest other than itself, just like any other valid art form. Turning classic from the very moment of its publishing by the huge DC house, the *Watchmen* series became a necessary reference for any discussion about *comics* and science-fiction alike, marking a perfect symbiosis point at the crossroads of high-quality entertainment, postmodern inter-textuality, perfectly managed narrative techniques, lucid political awareness and vivid philosophical inquiring. As any really good oeuvre, the literature it generated surpassed by far that which had generated it.

The nineties came with visible recoil in comic book sales. This situation had many causes, but maybe the most relevant were the exponential developments of new techniques in other media channels, which turned the attention of the most part of the public. New digital features made movies look really grandiose, new animated series became more and more attractive, and new computer games, benefiting from fast-evolving rendering technologies, strongly competed on the entertainment scene (but it is important to notice that some of the most appreciated films, cartoons and games got their stories and characters from the comic book universe: *Batman*, *Superman*, *X-Men*, *The Justice League*, *The Young Titans*, *Spi-derman*, *Transformers*, etc). Another reason for the sometimes dramatic situation of once more than profitable comic books was the

uninspired editorial policy, which led to some unpopular (to say the least) actions, such as the increasing of price per unit in order to recover the loss in numbers sold, continuity inconsistencies, or the need to copy other popular media types, which made *comics* look more like still movies or games and lose their individuality and uniqueness. When editors started “threatening” the fans with killing loved characters if the sales did not increase, the public felt betrayed (in 1992 even *Superman* experienced death, but that started a huge sympathy movement and the situation did not last, the *Kryptonian* saviour being revived and readapted), and the new depressive *comics* exploiting this trend made even more fans lose interest³³.

The new millennium started out with the shattering mentality-founding and context-setting event of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Although happening on American soil, it marked the re-shaping of the whole planet’s state of mind, simply pulverising the certainties of the previous decade. Once again reality surpassed imagination and literary scenarios lost much of their speculative power. The new generalized paranoia and mental depression resembles to the atomic fears of the first post-war decade. The comic book creators joined two major camps: the ones thinking that humanity really needed to return to old certified values and common interests, versus the ones that saw in this event the end of all ideologies, religions or philosophies; a state of relativity and uncertainty was the new context. Maybe this feeling of vulnerability gave a new impulse to the need of saviours and the super-heroic genre practically exploded (once again) in media channels, the huge DC and Marvel groups filling the market and the imaginary space with a flood of movies, games, TV series, comic books and songs dedicated to the seemingly never outdated super-heroic constellation (there



are simply too many titles to name them here).

Fantasy and comic books

As in the case of science-fiction, comic books offer the perfect medium for explicitly depicting imaginary landscapes and characters for fantasy stories, translating the abstract power of the written word into visual perceivable objects. Once again, the huge difference in producing costs, compared to film or animated cartoons, initially brought an advantage for the comic book option. But that is not the only reason *comics* excelled at disseminating certain codes of imagining settings, characters and events for popular genres of literature (although there existed projects to transpose abstract texts, such as philosophy or psychology, into comic books, they have not been profitable endeavours)³⁴. Being static, offering the possibility of constant re-evaluation and self-reference, purely visual yet using diverse codes for the other senses, comic books are maybe the closest to the ancient (and forever vital) oral way of telling stories.

If we exclude the graphic transpositions of well-known fairy-tales (*Cinderella*, *Snow White*, etc), which have been constantly revisited and reinterpreted in all types of media (and most of the times being addressed strictly to children, not offering strong basis for theorizing), we find a rich pool of extraordinary fantasy comic books, some only known by a rather small community of fans. It is important to state that just as in the case of science-fiction, there are many sub-genres of fantasy literature, and some are most successful in the graphic medium. The so-called “*heroic-fantasy*” was the most attractive for *comics*’ aficionados, the most loved character being *Conan the Barbarian*, created in 1918 by Robert E. Howard in 18 pulp volumes. So many series

were dedicated to this gloomy Cimmerian and so many top writers and artists have worked for this franchise that it became one of the strongest, most coherent and (not to be ignored) profitable imaginary world. It has transcended into all types of media, from movies (the main character being played by the colossal Arnold Schwarzenegger in two rather unsuccessful movies during the eighties), TV cartoon series in the nineties and many computer games. This type of fantasy and this particular character even inspired “macho” attitudes in the heavy-metal scene, some well-known bands dedicating songs, albums or whole careers to his story: *Manowar*, *Bathory*, etc. The attractive type of the “noble barbarian”, reminiscing of the Enlightenment “noble savage” (who does not only takes note of the idiosyncrasies of the “civilized” world, but instead corrects them with the power of his will, his granitic self-gained muscles and his purity of heart), became a well-known type in fantasy tales, the *comic* scene getting flooded by avatars of this recipe: *Kull*, *Claw the Unconquered*, etc.³⁵ Magic also appears in this kind of fantasy, yet it is often a source of conflict, the evil mage or sorceress playing the role of the villain which has to be stopped and punished by the righteous brave hero. Magic, as something uncontrollable, or at least controllable by very few (and therefore dangerous), is less reliable than one’s own physical and psychical strength and so it must not be the main force in ensuring order³⁶. I dare say that heroic-fantasy, by this attitude of favouring bodily strength over any form of magic brings a sort of materialist perspective into fantasy storytelling, in accordance with contemporary secular mentality (there are more than a few blockbuster movies that reinterpret classical myths and legends in such a key, devoid of mystery, magic or godly presence, turning them into historical possibilities: *Troy*, *King Arthur*, etc).



What may surprise the researcher is that despite of the apparent advantages other media types have over comic books (actual movement – or at least its more persuasive illusion, sound, inter-activeness), *Conan* is best known from and followed in *comics*. This is to prove once more that certain stories, narrative strategies and characters are best suited for this medium and cannot be presented with similar effects in any other (and, if needed, it justifies the presence of comic books among the most important media channels, destined not only for entertainment, but also for education or even aesthetic catharsis).

When talking about fantasy, of course, nobody can ignore the most influential author, whose work and ideas defined the genre as it is known today, Tolkien. It is neither the time nor the space to discuss here his oeuvre, but his paramount influence on the whole world's imagination needs to be pointed out. In fact, his *Lord of the Rings* became the main reference when it came to fantasy and it can be stated that the whole genre defines itself following Tolkien's concepts and methods³⁷. His imaginary setting penetrated all media channels and the products issued on this theme are more than could be counted. From films, animated cartoons series and comic books to computer games, all tell and retell the same story again and again. Of no lesser importance are the cultural products motivated by it and carrying its motifs (to talk again about music, T-Rex's front man Marc Bolan's obsession with Tolkien was notorious, and it can be stated that an entire genre of hard music, the so-called "symphonic power-metal", got its epic substance from Tolkienian sources). Comic books are relevant in this topic because of their essential contribution to imposing a largely accepted way of representing the races that have become the necessary ingredients for any fantasy scenario to be conceived: the playful hobbits,

the beautiful elves (fair and thin creatures with pointy ears that have caused mass hysteria among the fans³⁸), the grumpy dwarves and the infamous orcs³⁹.

It is also important to be aware that the aesthetic or the commercial values of an oeuvre are not always sufficient to impose it as a trendsetter and mentality-forger instance – it also needs a certain context, a larger receptivity and openness towards its message, atmosphere or style⁴⁰. Many editions of Tolkien's books have circulated in the last decades, many creators have exploited their narrative substance, but they have not generated the flood we could contemplate in the last years. The impulse was provided by the blockbuster trilogy from 2001, directed by Peter Jackson. But it came in a context already permeated by a "Celtic revival", manifested in all aspects of popular culture (successful artists like Enya or Loreena McKennit, the *Lord of the Dance* ballet show, Paco Rabanne's fashion, a plethora of magic and wizardry guides and even the multiplying of "pagan", "wiccan" and "druidic" cults all over the Western world), and let's not forget that Tolkien operates mainly with Celtic and Norse mythology. Similar contexts are obvious in recent history, such as the Egyptian or Greek-Roman Antiquity trend during the fifties and sixties (we only need to mention films like *Ben-Hur* or *Caesar and Cleopatra*), or the western trend during the sixties and the seventies (one name says it all: John Wayne).

When transferring a story into other media, only the epic aspect is kept though, each medium having its own properties that make it unique and irreplaceable. Therefore, the story can be told (or shown, or suggested, or sung), but it bears different attributes and requires different competences from the receiver. In other words, we may find out what happened to Frodo by reading the books or the *comics*, by watching the



movies or the cartoons, by listening to songs dealing with it, but we can find the overwhelming beauty of style and the (inter)textual complexity only in the book, just as only the movies can fascinate us with grandiose displays. More than that, when transferring a story into other media, different layers of interpretation are lost due to the new medium's internal restrictions.

Fantasy and science-fiction symbioses in comic books

There are, just as in other media, comic book works that combine traditional fantasy and science-fiction tropes. Some authors have pointed out that comic books get the fascination with magic directly from classical mythologies, in an only apparent opposition with science. Richard Reynolds, for example, states that the reverence towards science as found in comic books (and on a larger scale, in most science-fiction works) is just an alibi for magical structures, in a veritable "magic of science" (filled with fantastic artefacts of pseudo-scientific imagination, such as robots, rockets, mutants, time travels, orbital stations, etc)⁴¹. It must not come as a surprise, since the main issues are the same most of the time, as shown earlier. The rigorous categorization is mostly a matter of idiom.

An illustrative example here is the *Warlord* series, originally written and drawn by the prolific artist Mike Grell (beginning in 1975). The protagonist, an American supersonic plane pilot reaches, during a trial flight, a world where the sun always shines (*Skartaris*). Although this starting point is a classic in science-fiction scenarios, the story turns into heroic-fantasy, where swords and axes clash (but the hero, Travis Morgan, keeps his pistol, just in case), evil magicians threaten everybody and naked breathtaking

women put their own muscles into play (the setting being a permanent summer, everybody is as close as it gets to completely naked – Mike Grell being known for addressing an adult audience).

Another perfect example would be the 12-issues *Camelot 3000*, written by Mike W. Barr and marvellously drawn by Brian Bolland (from 1982 to 1985). The project "continues" the legend of King Arthur and his knights, by placing it in an overpopulated future Earth, where the Knights of the Round Table drive shuttles and shoot laser beams in order to vanquish Arthur's nemesis Morgana and her mutated hordes of minions. Beyond the certified entertainment value (coherent and intriguing storyline, astonishing graphics, surprises and humour), this series offers a perfect example of a postmodern popular work of art (trivia: Sir Galahad is a Japanese samurai and Sir Tristan is a woman), in the line of other valuable creations, such as *It's hard to be a god*, the iconic novel written by the Strougatski brothers (and others follow – is there any need to remind of James Cameron's *Avatar*?).

These *melanges* of fantasy and science-fiction prove once more that the two genres are in fact closer than it might seem at first, and even more, that any work in any one of these fields functions by integrating elements from the other (I have mentioned the "magic of science", but any fantasy scenario also integrates SF elements – suffice it to think of the dwarves and their mastery of technology and their incredible machines).

The most illustrative examples may be the Japanese comic books, the so-called *manga*, which are produced at an incredible rate and have swarmed the scene. Even when they borrow stories or characters from other cultures, the particular idiom they set them in is easily recognizable, but not so easily decipherable. *Manga* are known for the typical drawing (putting much accent on the expression, with accepted general codes



for suggesting various emotions), but also for their manner of constructing a storyline (and one must be familiarized with this idiom, lest the narration should be unappealing or incomprehensible to him/ her). Always crowded with characters and gadgets, always fast-paced and often with illogical series of events for a Western perception, Japanese *comics* combine science-fiction and fantasy elements in a nonchalant and fascinating manner. From acclaimed series as *Final Fantasy* (initially created as computer-games) to mature-oriented titles abundant in gory and erotic images, and even to Crowley-an satanic pornography (*Bible Black*, for example), *manga* represent a whole influential universe in itself, where hard-core cutting-edge technology is always imbued with omnipresent and omnipotent magic, with rough talking characters and harsh gestures (and with always vague and fluid gender relations).

Conclusion

Fantasy and science-fiction are two of the most popular genres in the entertainment industry of today. The relations they develop and maintain with one another and with other genres and fields in the larger cultural contexts are never simple and definitive. Being considered (unjustly) second-hand themes, expressing in all media channels (literature, films, TV series, comic books, animated cartoons, music, etc), they seldom benefit from academic attention (and most of the times they do, they are just used to illustrate the exotic detail). Nevertheless, imagination has always played a vital role in human history and many times it provided the required hypotheses, speculative artifices and brave motivations for political, social, cultural and even economic progress. If the differences between fantasy and science-fiction are mostly just codes commonly agreed upon via habit, the things they have in common

are more important and useful. In fact, they address similar audiences (in terms of cultural competence), deal with the same major issues, and do it in a grandiose manner. These are both fields of the hyperbolae.

Comic books are one of the media channels fantasy and science-fiction find expression in and due to their nature, they are one of the most efficient for this kind of stories. In fact, science-fiction and fantasy represent the overwhelming majority of comic book scenarios, finding the perfect medium for the graphic display of imagination. If comic books are also looked down upon by the cultural establishment, there were some occasions in which they have become greatly influential, relevant, profitable, and with high aesthetic value. Even though the digital technology of today give a tremendous advantage to other types of entertainment channels, such as films of computer games, comic books have some traits that make them unique and when properly exploited, these traits lead to exquisite products. Not everything can be transposed into comic books, but some stories are best presented in this medium and that enriches the human experience and artistic horizon overall. And as Vladimir Nabokov has once said, a great author has to simultaneously be a good storyteller, a good teacher and a good enchanter. There are not few examples of efficient enchantments in comic books and he who knows where to look finds extreme pleasure, knowledge and catharsis when having glimpses of an alternative history.

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Notes

¹ Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke and Gideon Haberkorn identify two main causes for this situation: the comic books are easily taken for illustrated literature or “frozen” film, being “deceptively easy to focus on their similarities to other media, and ignore their uniqueness”; and secondly, they are much more strongly rooted in popular culture than either film or literature, “and thus often not taken seriously”, Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke, Gideon Haberkorn, *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures. Essays on the Interplay of Media, Disciplines and International Perspectives*, Jefferson, North Carolina, and London, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2010, p. 1.

² The comic book industry played an important role in the American economy during the Great Crisis and the Second World War: in 1942 not less than 15 million units have been sold, and in 1943 the sales reached an incredible number of 25 million (with a 20 million dollars profit), 35 000 *Superman* titles having been sent across the Atlantic towards the American soldiers in Europe, cf. Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation. The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2001, p. 34.

³ The *comics* industry in Japan roughly produces around 4.7 billion dollars a year. This



number is even more astonishing when compared to the 100 million dollars a year this industry produces in the United States, the “homeland” of comics-books. Cf. Kensuke Okabayashi, *Manga for Dummies*, Wiley Publishing, Indianapolis, 2007, p. 13.

⁴ Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke, Gideon Haberkorn, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁵ Bradford Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁶ Superman’s creators confessed that they have made up this character after reading body-building magazines and western and science-fiction stories. They have also admitted that Superman was thought as a mixture of the great mythic heroic figures from Antiquity such as Samson and Hercules, although some authors consider him closer to Achilles, due to his hot temper and weak spot – his sensibility to kryptonite, the supposed fragmented remains of his home planet soil (Michael Shapiro, *100 cei mai influenți evrei din toate timpurile*, trad. Liviu Mateescu, Paralela 45, Pitești, 2006, p. 364). Bradford Wright sees Superman as the „epitome of modern adolescent fantasy” (Bradford Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 1)

⁷ The influence of a work of art is not necessarily proportional with its aesthetic qualities.

⁸ Jean-Bruno Renard, „Science-Fiction et Extraterrestres. Bibliographie Thématique”, in *Archives des sciences sociales des religions*, nr. 50, p. 145.

⁹ Leslie Fiedler, „The Criticism of Science Fiction”, in George E. Slusser, Eric S. Rabkin, Robert Scholes (ed), *Placing Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1983, p. 12.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹¹ David Seed remarks that placing the origin of science-fiction so far back in history raises some “problems of cultural practice”

and proposes to label these works as “ur-SF”. He considers the works of the Renaissance to be closer to the present-day methods in writing and names them “proto-SF”. But he evaluates science-fiction as a “mode of field where different genres and sub-genres intersect” which originated during the late 19th century, “with a great upsurge in utopias, future-war narratives, and representatives of other genres that can be grouped under the SF umbrella”, David Seed, *Science Fiction. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 2-3

¹² Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. viii.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. ix.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. x.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. xi.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. x.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. xi.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. xi.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. xiv.

²⁰ Jean-Bruno Renard, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

²¹ Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz, *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, London, New York, Continuum, 2001, p. 2.

²² Roger Schlobin, apud Donald E. Morse, *The Fantastic World in Literature and the Arts*, New York, Westport, London, Greenwood Press, 1987, p. 2.

²³ Donald E. Morse, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²⁴ Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz, *op. cit.*, p. 2. The authors continue their argument with the apparent paradox of fantasy (and science fiction, for that matter): for all the “endless ingenuity of the human imagination”, the forms that fantasy takes are “surprisingly limited”, making use of the same restricted number of recurrent motifs and elements, which could give the impression of the entire



genre being doomed to extinction through repetition and parody. “The grip of formula” might indicate that “one part of the human psyche is frightened of the other” (“imagination is too dangerous to wander unchained”); but a more prosaic explanation the authors point to would be the need to make it comprehensible to more than one person (“most private fantasies would need a good many footnotes were they to be made public in their raw state”). A common sense conclusion imposes itself: “ritualizing is neither surprising, nor exclusive to fantasy”, *ibidem*, p. 3.

²⁵ Kurt Vonnegut, *Un om fără de țară*, Bucharest, Rao, 2008, p. 28.

²⁶ The sentence is beyond any doubt: “We pronounce you guilty of modern history’s greatest crime – unprovoked aggression against defenseless countries”, apud Les Daniels, *DC Comics. 60 Years of the World’s Favorite Comic Book Heroes*, Bullfinch Press, Boston, 1995, p. 65.

²⁷ Once the stories enter the cycle of “continuity”, they have to respect previous determinations related to the main characters and the relations between them, important events and framework changes. For example, Superman evolved greatly during the first decades after the Second World War, his powers increasing, his enemies multiplying and his “imaginary map” reorganizing itself (let’s not forget that at first he was stronger than any man, he could run faster than a train or leap the tallest building; compared to the Superman we know today, with his godlike abilities, the original seems a fragile sketch). On one hand, the editorial policy had to constantly reshape (meaning augment) the main characters in order to keep or even increase their attractiveness, but on the other hand, that trend carried the risk of not finding interesting and satisfying intrigues

(what dangers could mobilize and threaten an omnipotent character?). Many times that resulted into ridiculous plots (Mort Weisinger had stated once that “Superman must truly be invulnerable, once he survived so many bad scripts.”), apud Philippe Forest, “Superman”, in Pierre Brunel (ed.), *Miturile secolului XX*, Bucharest, Univers, 2003, vol. 2, p. 291.

²⁸ Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the couch. What superheroes really tell us about ourselves and our society*, Continuum, New York, 2004, p. 18-21.

²⁹ To read comic books became a statement among the American students, a strong but pacifist way of protesting against the establishment. 50 000 students enrolled themselves in the *Marvel Fan Club*; and when Stan Lee, Marvel’s mastermind gave a lecture at Bard College, he attracted a bigger audience than the former president Eisenhower, who was lecturing at the same time at the same college. (cf. Bradford Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 223).

³⁰ Between 1970 and 1974, the female students at the highly respected MIT doubled their numbers and most of them admit they were stimulated by the Star Trek TV series (cf. Guy Consolmagno, “Astronomy, Science Fiction and Popular Culture: 1277 to 2001”, in *Leonardo*, vol. 29, nr. 2, 1996, p. 127). It is also to be mentioned that the TV series *Star Trek* featured the first scripted interracial kiss ever to be broadcasted for the American public in 1968’s episode *Plato’s Stepchildren*, and it involved the white captain Kirk (William Shatner) and the gorgeous black lieutenant Uhura (Nichelle Nichols).

³¹ *Judge Dredd*, a dystopian scenery set into a post-apocalyptic America, was created by the English as a satire towards the *New Right* politics in the Anglo-Saxon societies, championed by Reagan and Thatcher, and



the strong violence depicted in the series targeted the myth of the righteous right-wing justice-dealing cowboy proposed by the American president.

³² It can be stated that if women were more visible during the hippy ages (as public but also as creators), the heavy-metal years were almost exclusively and aggressively masculine (by men, for men).

³³ Paradoxically, that was one of the bestsellers series in all *comics* industry (as a rule, the first and the last number of a series are the most expensive), but in short time, these issues turned cheaper than their original sell value (more than 6 millions have been sold). The editor, Mike Carlin, denies the marketing value of that decision and argues that it had been just “a mere joke that got out of hand”. (apud Les Daniels, *op. cit.*, p. 219).

³⁴ Pierre Christin, the writer of the much acclaimed French SF graphic series *Valérian*, considered *comics* to be the ideal medium for action and representation, the vehicle of an imaginative capacity that operates by “fantasizing over the real world”. It is not proper for psychological or abstract themes, because it is defined by certain psychological limits (“one cannot place two characters in the same room along 58 pages”, as it can be done in theater), apud Dodo Niță, *Europa benzilor desenate*, Bucharest, POL Media, 2001, p. 70-72.

³⁵ The recipe is simple but efficient and its attractiveness seems to never end: the main hero, a “moving mountain” of oversized muscles, the necessary young girl (needing to be rescued or a partner in combat, but having a perfect body in any case), the old father-figure (a tutor, a master or an old friend), and some (hilarious) sidekicks. Of course, everybody has to show as much skin as possible.

³⁶ Even when magic helps the good heroes, it comes in second, only as a tool, of lesser

importance than their will and strength; in an episode, when fighting alongside Elric (another fantasy hero, who possesses a sword that grants him the strength of defeated opponents, just as in the *Highlander* series), Conan remarks: “Is it only magic that makes you strong? Dishonoring!”.

³⁷ Although he was the one imposing the framework for fantasy fictions in 1965, today the most part of the authors are women, who present a fabulous Middle Ages, but not as it was, historically speaking, but “as it should have been”, exploring alternative social constructions and narrating old myths filtered through modern sensibilities, cf. Guy Consolmagno, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

³⁸ A strange fashion occurred among the fans, when they have started requesting ear surgery to resemble to what elves were supposed to look like.

³⁹ The general code of representing those imaginary beings was formulated recently. In 1975, in communist Romania, when Tolkien’s *Hobbit* got translated, Livia Rusz, one of the leading graphic artists in the country, was supposed to create the illustrations. Not aware of this code, she had to invent, the result being quite different from what is generally accepted hobbits should look like. But the quality of the drawings granted them the selection into the official encyclopedia of Tolkien’s world, *A Hobbit*, cf. Dodo Niță, Kiss Ferenc, *Livia Rusz. O monografie*, MJM, Craiova, 2009, p. 33

⁴⁰ In 1978, Ralph Bakshi directed an animated movie, *The Lord of the Rings*, which although a financial success (30.5 million dollars in box-office from a 4 million dollars budget in production), did not reach the iconic level.

⁴¹ Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes. A Modern Mythology*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1992, p. 54