

Is Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* Fascist? Resolving the Paradoxes of Heroic Violence

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By Carlos Tkacz

ABSTRACT

The Dark Knight Returns traces the polarizing paradoxes seen between the political left and right in the United States—the right at once advocating for distributed networks of self-defense in widespread firearm availability and keeping the “thin blue line” of state power intact while the left simultaneously rejects both personal defense and policing as viable forms of mediation from bad actors—and then reimagines Batman as a metaphor by which these paradoxes are resolved.

Keywords: superhero; comics; Batman; political violence; fascism; Frank Miller

¿Es fascista *El regreso del caballero oscuro* de Frank Miller? Resolviendo las paradojas de la violencia heroica

RESUMEN

The Dark Knight Returns rastrea las paradojas polarizadoras observadas entre la izquierda y la derecha política en los Estados Unidos: la derecha al mismo tiempo aboga por redes distribuidas de autodefensa con disponibilidad generalizada de armas de fuego y mantiene intacta la “delgada línea azul” del poder estatal mientras el La izquierda rechaza simultáneamente tanto la defensa personal como la vigilancia policial como formas viables de mediación de los malos actores, y luego reimagina a Batman como una metáfora mediante la cual se resuelven estas paradojas.

Carlos Tkacz tiene una maestría de la Universidad Estatal de California, Bakersfield, y actualmente es un doctorado. Estudiante de la Universidad de Nevada, Las Vegas, donde estudia la ficción especulativa y la cultura pop a través de una lente ecocrítica en el contexto anglófono global. Sus intereses son la literatura nativa americana, la ciencia ficción, las representaciones de la violencia y la teoría narrativa.

Palabras clave: superhéroe; historietas; Batman; violencia política; fascismo; Frank Miller

弗兰克·米勒的《黑暗骑士归来》是法西斯主义吗？解决英雄暴力悖论

摘要

《黑暗骑士归来》追溯了美国政治左右翼之间的极化悖论——右翼一方面倡导在广泛的枪支供应中建立分布式自卫网络，另一方面保持国家权力的“细蓝线”完好无损，而左翼同时拒绝将个人防卫和治安视为与坏人进行调解的可行形式——然后将蝙蝠侠重新想象为一种解决这些悖论的隐喻。

Carlos Tkacz取得了加州州立大学贝克斯菲尔德分校的文学硕士学位，目前是内华达大学拉斯维加斯分校的博士生，他的博士研究聚焦于在全球英语情境下透过生态批判视角研究推理小说和流行文化。他的研究兴趣包括美洲原住民文学、科幻小说、暴力表现、以及叙事理论。

关键词：超级英雄，漫画，蝙蝠侠，政治暴力，法西斯主义，弗兰克·米勒

INTRODUCTION

Alan Moore, acclaimed comic book writer and author of pop culture classics like *The Watchmen* (1986–87) and *V for Vendetta* (1982), famously told *The Guardian* in 2022 that a love of superhero comics can be “a precursor to fascism.” In particular, Moore traces in superhero fandom an “urge towards simpler times, towards simpler realities,” and he mentions Batman specifically in his assessment. Damien Walter, also in *The Guardian* but in 2016, an important year for the rise of fascism in the United States, offers a similar view, focusing here on Frank Miller's 1986 *The Dark Knight Returns*; Miller, Walter contends, made “Batman a fascist” who “dish[es] out violent retribution as he sees fit.” Miller's “fascist imagination” is, according to this reading, comparable to “Donald Trump's bid for presidency,” which “relie[d] on the same heroic myth” that Batman operates in. This reasoning engages in a long tradition of criticism against superhero comics, and other critics elsewhere have adequately outlined the problems with these criticisms and defended the genre thus. Indeed, comics scholars have traced elements of fascist ideology in the earliest manifestations of superhero comics. Chris Gavalier, in his discipline-defining book *Superhero Comics* (2017), points out that critiques of superhero comics have traditionally tied the genre to fascism through its emphasis on violence and individual vigilantism (103).¹

1 Nicole Deveranne points towards an “analytical tradition” that connects “the superhero comic [with] the darkness at the heart of much nationalist sentiment,” in turn “underpinned with Fascist ideology” (49). Deveranne singles out Gershon Legman and Fredric Wertham as beginning this tradition, which lasted through the 90s and has continued into the 21st century. These works, and others, claim that the “fascist origins” of superhero comics “remain embedded in the genre and continue to influence the hero type” (Gavalier 106). Fascist ideology, which manifests itself in contemporary superheroes through “violent, nationalistic, anti-democratic, totalitarian heroism” (Gavalier 103), has become the “one

However, it should be noted that superheroes were “conceived during the threat of fascism, reached their highest popularity with the expansion of fascist-fighting war, and began to wane not at the close of that war, but at the earliest signs of a still distant victory” (Gavaler 102). The genre’s close ties to the historical growth and subsequent fall of fascism is a double-edged sword; while it closely ties the genre’s character formulas to fascism and allows for the comparison of superhero methods to those of fascist institutions—namely violence, nationalism, and authoritarianism—it also makes clear that the genre was conceived in response to the rise of fascism, in tension with the political problems fascism brings. The fact that superhero comics came to popularity during World War II (Gavaler 103) indicates a more complicated relationship at work, especially in relation to the use of violence, in the genre. As Nicole Devarenne observes, “While the American superhero genre is compatible with nationalist ideology in some respects, its vernacular linguistic format, restrained and regulated, both complies with this ideology and represents the potential for its subversion” (52). Important to this possibility is the concept of crisis, for if superhero comics were developed in response to a crisis, their continued relevance

of the formula’s constants” as “it is always the fist clenched inside the glove” (Gavaler 96). This results, according to critics, in a “romanticized authoritarianism” that remains “a crucial element of the superhero formula” and that reveals “a nostalgia that seeks the fantasy of moral certitude once embraced by democratic society besieged by fascism” (Gavaler 124). *The Virginian*, a western vigilante and frontiersman published in 1902 by Owen Wiser, is credited as one of the first of these “hybrid heroes” and takes on the “godlike role of moral arbiter” that operates in the “western formula” that “both fears and romanticizes border-crossing” and “express[es] the same colonial anxiety that fueled eugenics” (Gavaler 59-60). Gavaler observes that this formulation of vigilantism, which works to “defeat the animal-like degenerate,” has been explicitly connected to Batman, who (here, Gavaler quotes Andreas Reichstein) “blurs ‘the line between man and beast’” (60).

is tied to the solidifying of crisis as a primary mode of political rhetoric and economic opportunity in the 21st century.² This history of shifting and continued relevance undercuts the narrative that superheroes are to blame for the resurgence of fascism in American politics in the 21st century. Rather, superhero comics, with their stunningly successful and continuing transition into film, remain important cultural artifacts that reveal much about the societies that produce them, and they point towards the fact that “we in the real world need fictional superheroes just as much as the diegetic populations” they save (McSweeney 268). In this light, it is clear that superhero comics operate in a much more complex relationship with the societies in which they circulate than accusations of fascist sympathies allow for.

In order to parse out if *The Dark Knight Returns* created a fascist turn in the character, it is necessary to answer the following question: What exactly is Miller's Batman doing? There is no doubt about his violence and his assumed jurisdiction in Gotham City—what are the particular details that allow him to, despite this, avoid authoritarianism and fascism, and what is he doing instead? Or, another way to put the question: if not fascist, then what? For it is quite clear that Miller's 1986 Batman is doing something interesting—the enduring relevance of the text is testament enough to that fact. And the confusion about the nature of this Batman's action is telling in and of itself, for it points towards contradictory feelings about violence broadly and personal and political violence

2 Naomi Klein calls this particular manifestation of neoliberalism that operates through “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities,” the “‘disaster capitalism complex’” (6, 14). For more, see her excellent book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007).

more specifically. Yet in a world where the call to defund the police—an outcry about the state monopoly on violence—can sit in political proximity to the call to help the Ukrainian military as it defends its country against Russian invasion, it behooves critics and scholars to look more closely, despite the discomfort, at the operations of violence in the social structures at work in the world. This is the surest path to a better understanding of the ethics of violence and, through the act of criticism itself, to a world in which there is less of it. Published in the middle of Ronald Regan’s tenure as president of the United States, an era of U.S. politics that has come to define the modern, neoliberal turn towards a more authoritarian rightwing political landscape, *The Dark Knight Returns* is especially well-situated to help answer these questions.

Claims that Batman, in particular Miller’s Batman, is fascist or leads to fascist ideology lean heavily on approximately half the definition of fascism: the emphasis on the imposition of will, usually through violence, and the importance of the individual leader—the language of the “superman” makes it easy to connect superheroes to fascism while ignoring the necessary attachment to nationalism.³ Yet, the comparison

3 Carl Plantinga observes that fascism “is a political ideology with a constellation of associated social and ethical commitments” that are historically linked “with the political formations in Germany, Italy, and Japan before and during World War II, and to some extent in Spain until the fall of Francoism in 1975” (22). Plantinga, in defining the term, distills fascism to its “nationalist, elitist, and antiliberal” elements; fascism is “extreme nationalism that attempts to unite a favored people (the “folk”), sometimes with an appeal to a mythic and glorious past, under a strong leader figure who is acceded complete control” (22). Furthermore, the ideology “evinces an ethos of ethnic and national purity, favoring the strong, healthy, and pure over what is thought to be weak, diseased, and impure or inauthentic” and “is also imperialistic in that it promotes the right of the ‘naturally superior’ to colonize, exploit, and even kill the inferior and ‘defective’” (22). Finally, fascism is “is about

does not hold up, as Batman and characters like him fail to fulfill the necessary requirements of state and an adherence to survival of the fittest—though, it is possible, as can be seen through a comparison of Miller's Batman to his Superman, for superheroes to close that gap. Ultimately, Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* is about that very gap, about how narrow yet distinct the difference between fascism and what Batman is engaged in is.⁴ Rather than indicating Miller's ability "to package our fantasies into blockbusting money machines" (Walter), Miller's classic Batman graphic novel indexes tensions implicit and explicit in the use of violence

total stability, control, and homogeneity under the headship of an idealized leader" in charge of "a mythic and idealized nation" (23). Fascism is, at heart, an organizing principal, political and social in nature, that emphasizes the state and dictatorial power and precludes the possibility of opposition. McGill University, on their website, calls fascism "a radical political ideology that combines elements of corporatism, authoritarianism, nationalism, militarism, anti-liberalism and anti-communism." They point out that the word is derived from "the Italian word *fascio*," which refers to a "bundle, as in a political or militant group, or a nation." Another root word is "fascis (rods bundled around an axe), which was an ancient Roman symbol of the authority of magistrates." The etymology of fascism then indicates "strength through unity; a single rod is easily broken, while the bundle is very difficult to break." The Columbia Encyclopedia offers still more specifics, adding that "most important is the glorification of the state and the total subordination of the individual to it." The state, here, is "an organic whole into which individuals must be absorbed for their own and the state's benefit" and that is "is absolute in its methods and unlimited by law in its control and direction of its citizens." Also important to note that fascism is a form of social Darwinism: "The doctrine of survival of the fittest and the necessity of struggle for life is applied by fascists to the life of a nation-state." This necessitates that "struggle and aggressive militarism" be "a leading characteristic of the fascist state" and leads to "[i]mperialism [as] the logical outcome of this dogma." Finally, the "concept of the leader as hero or superman, fascism's rejection of reason and intelligence and its emphasis on vision, creativeness, and 'the will.'"

4 In the graphic novel, this gap is narrativized in the differences between Batman and Superman.

as a form of social control in any civil society. These tensions can be traced in the polarizing paradoxes seen between the political left and right in the United States—the right at once advocating for distributed networks of self-defense in widespread firearm availability and keeping the “thin blue line” of state power intact while the left simultaneously rejects both personal defense and policing as viable forms of mediation from bad actors. When Batman’s actions are closely considered through the relationship among the three participants in each instance of his “crimefighting,” described in this article as the triangle of superhero intervention, it becomes clear that his behavior indicates something altogether different than a tendency towards fascism. In the graphic novel, where Bruce Wayne comes out of retirement when a wave of brutality originating both from within and from without Gotham City threatens to overwhelm its inhabitants, Batman operates in the space between the treatments of violence projected by dominant political ideologies. It is exactly in this space between the reality of violence and the perpetuation of that violence in attempts to control it that René Girard’s reading of mythology in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) offers productive ground from which to consider how Miller’s Batman functions. Girard posits violence as a fundamental part of the human experience and sees, in particular, ritual sacrifice as a means to curb the spread of violence in a community. Miller’s Batman takes on the mantles of both the sacrificer and the sacrificed through the ritualizing of his action by virtue of the genre norms of the superhero comic, thereby reimagining Batman as a metaphor through which political and social violence can be rerouted towards productive ends.

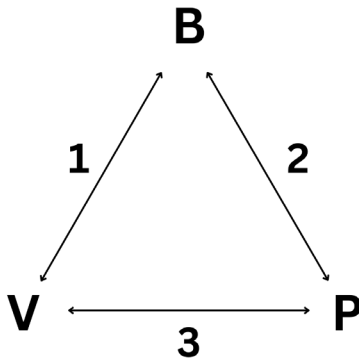


Image 1

THE TRIANGLE OF SUPERHERO INTERVENTION

Chris Yogerst, in “Superhero Films: a Fascist National Complex or Exemplars of Moral Virtue?” observes that, “[i]n order to be truly fascist one must stay in the role of power and retain it” (12). For fascism, the state is not only an implement of violent control—this is the part that Batman detractors focus on—but it is also a necessary component of the continuation of that power. This continuation necessitates several institutional elements that Batman, by virtue of his status as a masked vigilante, does not have—think back to the part of the etymology of the word fascism that emphasizes the “bundle.” The state is the aggregate of these institutional structures for the sedimentation of power, built on political control of the *entire* citizenry and on the authority of a cult-of-personality based in a single, individual leader. Batman, first of all, lacks political control over the citizenry—he lacks the kind of biocontrol Foucault defines in his explanations of biopower and biopolitics.⁵ This can be seen

5 For Foucault, one of the principle features of modern human relations is a new form of power that “is applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-living-being” and, furthermore, to “man-as-species.” He specifies that State discipline, in this newer form, “tries to rule a

in the way in which Batman works— each instance of action that Batman engages in is a kind of triangle made up of the masked hero (represented in image 1 as B), the victim of a crime (V—often, especially in *The Dark Knight Returns*, the victim of a violent crime), and the perpetrator of the crime (here given the designation P). Batman-as-fascist advocates emphasize and focus only on side 2 of this triangle: Batman (B) v. Perpetrator (P). While it is true that, in this literally single-sided view, Batman is using brute force to impose his will on P, this emphasis flattens out the encounter by ignoring sides 1 and 3; it is only through this obfuscation of the entire interaction that the claim of Batman as fascist can be made. It is important to note that, when emphasizing side 2, the initial target of violence, V is ignored. This is not to say that P is not also a kind of victim, for they too suffer (especially in Miller’s version of Batman), but to leave out V is to forget that P is also engaged in the same kind of action that Batman-as-fascist advocates focus their arguments on: P is imposing their will, through side 3, on V. When the other, necessary sides are considered, the ways in which Batman’s actions circumvent the problems of fascist violence become clear. Side 3 is primary—it always comes first. To conflate side 2 with what happens in side 3 is to ignore the order of operations here, and the order of events is fundamental to understanding the dynamic of the violent interaction represented by this triangle. The temporality here is related to outcome. As Yogerst observes, “Superheroes and fascists both believe they are being altruistic, however, the end result is very different as one saves lives while the other destroys them in hopes of an unattainable utopian future” (18). The differences in outcomes can be conflated only when the chronology is both flattened

multiplicity of men” through their “individual bodies” with surveillance, training, and punishment” (242).

and narrowed. On a longer timeline, one that takes into account the temporal primacy of side 3, it becomes clear that “[s]uperheroes have legal and ethical boundaries that differ from fascists as evidenced by the fact that superheroes do not strive to become rulers of the societies they protect” (Yogerst 18). When these facts are taken into account, side 3—that between the victim and the perpetrator—is seen to be the actual imposition of the will, is the original, therefore actual, authoritarian act with fascist leanings. If this is all true, then side 2, in which Batman intervenes through violent contact with P, is not a fascist act but, rather, anti-fascist or anti-authoritarian.

This is also why Batman sometimes fails; in *The Dark Knight Returns*, the Joker, who exists somewhat outside of the authoritarian matrix brought into the conversation by the organized nature of the mutant gang, is able to kill many victims before Batman intervenes. Batman lives with the hauntings of these failures—he says to himself, after an explosion masterminded by the Joker destroys an apartment building, “I’ll count the dead one by one. I’ll add them to the list, Joker. The list of people I’ve murdered—by letting you live” (Miller 117)—just like he is haunted by the original death of his parents—his origin story. Batman has the resources to become more preventive, more predictive, in his crimefighting,⁶ but to do so would be to make the fascist turn he is accused of and always resisting. There is an important tension here between his successes as a “crimefighter” and his failures; those who see Batman as a fascist emphasize his successes but for-

6 Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) includes this possibility in its plot—Batman does create a massive surveillance system in order to stop the Joker and then destroys it due to the problematic ethics. Even as he creates the technology, he sidesteps the fascist possibilities by never allowing himself to be completely in charge of its usage, instead delegating that power to Lucius Fox.

get the degree to which he “generally governed by a shared set of principles that is accepted by much of the free world” (Yogerst)—namely, protection of those unable to protect themselves, his commitment to which means that he will inevitably be too late some of the time. Each of these failures become arguments against his existence. Note how state actors, mainly police, attack him directly after his faceoff with the Joker. At the same time, he is blamed for the Joker’s death; the new police commissioner adds murder to Batman’s rap sheet. The complicated position Batman embodies, one that is always reactionary and that actively refuses to go farther than that, cannot be reduced to fascism, if not for the reasons outlined above then for the reason that, as Yogerst observes, “If Batman were a true fascist, he would never sacrifice the power of his persona to help a city in crisis” (23). The very positionality Batman occupies puts his actions in direct tension with the kind of power that would be necessary for him to acquire in order to be a fascist.

SACRIFICING AND SACRIFICED

In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard sets out to understand violence in terms of sacrifice: “We may say that there is ... hardly any form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice” (1). Girard sees in sacrifice a positive social function. To his reading, the “purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community” by “protect[ing] the entire community from its own violence” (8). The “own violence” referenced here is primarily vengeance, “an interminable, infinitely repetitive process” that requires structural violence in order to stop its spread because it is that people “detest violence that [they] make a duty of vengeance” (14, 15). Girard writes of the repetitive nature of violence as being infectious (27) precisely because it self-perpetuates

endlessly: “[o]nly violence can put an end to violence” (26). This fact, for Girard, burns through human feelings about violence and elevates it to something akin to the sacred, as both are “forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man’s effort to master them” (31). Ritual and sacrifice then become the methods by which this contradiction is potentially resolved. In order to explore this possibility, Girard primarily relies on myth and the study of myth. Emphasizing a few of his sources, Girard reads from Oedipus, for whom the search for the origins of “impure violence” lead back to tragedy and the “surrogate victim” (69, 79), to a reinterpretation of Freud that reads the Oedipus complex in terms of “sacrificial crisis” (177) and then to Structuralism, where he engages with modern, technological violence (240). Ultimately, Girard argues that these ideas, the surrogate victim and its manifestations, are the source of all rituals and therefore are the source of “all the great institutions of mankind, both secular and religious” (306). It is ritual, then, that “gradually leads men away from the sacred.; it permits them to escape their own violence, removes them from violence and bestows on them all the institutions and beliefs that define their humanity” (306). That is to say, humanity is, at least in part, defined by the very thing it considers to be inhumane. With these ideas in mind, the triangle of superhero intervention is a kind of ritual in which the hero, in the case of this essay Batman, transforms themselves into both the sacrificer *and* the sacrificed, both the surrogate victim and the one tasked with doing violence to the victim, thus untangling the ethical issues surrounding violence by carrying both the traumas of doing and receiving violence in his mind and body.

Batman’s initial reemergence is instructive, as it sets the tone for his action throughout the graphic novel and informs the



Image 2

nature of the ending—which is, in this work, the end of his action for the time being. Bruce Wayne’s reemergence as Batman begins on page 28 (Image 2) of the collected edition and has several key features that points towards a more complicated and nuanced form of violence than possible in state forms like fascism. It should be noted that these scenes depicting Batman’s return as a crimefighter are interspersed with interjections taken from news outlets, a narrative tool Miller relies on throughout the story in order to contextualize the narrow actions of the characters within the broader context of the city of the Gotham and offers a way for Miller to narrativize several viewpoints at once: that of the mainstream media, which includes the voices of experts, politicians, state actors, and media personalities but rarely that of the people Batman helps. The text itself plays with this juxtaposition; Batman’s return begins with a newscaster describ-

ing the weather, reporting that it is “like the wrath of God” is “headed for Gotham” (Miller 27). This characterization, to which the reader is privy only a few moments later, of Batman’s work as the “wrath of God” gestures towards the ways in which he operates within the structures of human narratives—the wrath of God being a narrative construction that is often invoked to make sense events that operate beyond the human pale—and outside of them, for the content of the simile turns Batman’s actions into something outside the purview of human control and understanding. In the next moment, the reader is shown a woman walking home in the rain, carrying groceries. This person, V in the above formulation of the relationship among the general actors in each moment of Batman’s interventions, is given no history—the reader knows nothing about them. Their history is irrelevant, for it is what happens next that defines the parameters of the entire scene. A shadowy figure appears behind the woman, dark except for the reflected light of their glasses. This person, P in my formulation, threatens the woman with a knife and some vaguely sexual commentary. It is now that Batman appears, *after the threat is clear*, to intervene, but only as a shadowy, incomplete figure himself. Batman first appears as a backlit hand grabbing P’s knife hand and then his face, pulling him through the glass window of a door. The reader is not privy to what happens next, though it is safe to assume that Batman physically incapacitates P.

The next two interventions, which occur on pages 28-32, follow a similar narrative structure: there is a recognizable setup, some kind of threat, and then an intervention from Batman. The situations into which Batman interjects himself vary—on pages 28 through 29 it is a moment in which a pimp threatens a prostitute in a taxicab, and on 30 into 32 two young women, one of whom will become Robin later

in the story,⁷ are threatened by several gang members near an arcade. In each, the reader is given an increasingly clearer view of Batman. In the taxi, the reader sees both his foot and his hand but not shadowed this time. At the arcade, the reader sees his full form, though shadowed and obscured by his cape, as well as perhaps his most famous weapon, the batarang. The reader also sees more and more of the conflict between Batman and the Ps: the reader sees Batman's foot come down on the pimp's hand, and the reader "hears" Batman strike him. Outside the arcade, the reader sees the moment directly before and after Batman throws his batarangs and then one of the gang members is thrown into the electric sign. What is important here is the measured and incremental unveiling of Batman as a physical presence in the pages of the comic; it is not until page 34 that the reader is given a full view of the character in a classic-splash page: the hero coming down from above, cape splayed, arms out, one hand in a fist.

This sequence of unveiling accomplishes several narrative feats important to the argument of this article. First, the incremental nature of "showing" in the introduction of Batman into the story puts the emphasis on the character's actions rather than on his form and self. That is, the reader is introduced to Batman through his intervention in the moment between V and P, at once making clear the narrative triangle explained above and starting the reader off, in each instance,

7 It is noteworthy that the second time the reader sees Robin, her parents are speaking in the background of the text and are calling Batman "[o]bviously a fascist" who has "never heard of civil rights" (45). Through what little of their conversation that is depicted, the audience understands that her parents are of generation that came out of the aftermath of 1968 (or, perhaps, some analogous, DC universe version); they lament "[a]ll the marching [they] did" and believe the "American conscience died with the Kennedys" (45).

from the perspective of V. This, secondly, amounts to a narrative ritualization of the character's actions. The narrative pattern established in these opening moments of Batman's return hinges on the repetition of a narrative model (which is reinforced through the use grids in the paneling of the pages themselves) that relies on the gradual unveiling of the operative actant in the intervention. These two factors, repetition and the obscuring of the forces at work through shadow (both in the art itself and in the presentation of the art), turn the moment that Batman appears into a kind of ritual that, like all rituals, is a reproducible model that nonetheless is, in each moment and due to the necessity of the other corners of the triangle, unique in each iteration. These two narrative points are strengthened through the juxtaposed dialogue happening in the same sequence of panels; Batman's interventions are, simultaneously for the reader but in different temporal moments in the actual story world of the narrative, described from various media perspectives, including interviews with the victims.¹ This stylistic choice by Miller serves to more directly move Batman's actions into the ritual space. When the characters in this sequence of pages discuss what is happening, using phrases like "bat-like creature" (32), "huge man dressed like Dracula" (32), "wild animal" (34), "with fangs and wings" (34), and "about twelve feet tall" (34), Batman ceases to be Bruce Wayne and becomes a symbolic entity that acts in the world through the ritualization of those actions, as evidenced by the descriptions of those who experience the outcomes of those actions. It is also noteworthy that, up to this point, the reader has already been well-introduced to Wayne, so this second introduction, fully separate in the narrative and in the stylistic choices Miller makes, further serves to separate the man from the bat, Wayne from Batman; as Batman says on page 34, he is "born again" in these moments, becoming something that transcends (as,

again, is seen in the various descriptions witnesses attach to their experiences) the human and the individual.

All of this fits neatly into Girard's conception of ritual violence as being something different from the violence it works to stop, a distinction those who argue that Batman operates through fascist means fail to grasp. The early pages of the text describe a Gotham caught in a "heat wave" of "civil violence" (11); the use of the word "civil" to describe the violence is important, as it points towards a violence that comes from the members of the city themselves (as opposed to from without). This is a form of what Girard calls the community's "own violence" (8), and, again similar to Girard's read on this kind of community violence, the violence in Gotham is "going to get worse before it gets better" (Miller 14). This last statement, made by a TV weatherman, is made in connection to the crime wave hitting Gotham at the same time as the heat wave. The connection of the environmental to the violent operates as a kind of unifying metaphor through which the violence can be conceptualized as Girard sees it, as infectious and as spreading through communities through replication and that must be, somehow, stopped—preferably from within that community itself. It is important to note that Batman operates outside of state-sanctioned violence, a fact noted already and that makes it impossible for Batman's action to be considered fascist. Rather, Batman's interventions act as rituals that stop the spread the violence without becoming structures of violence that further perpetuate.

SIGNALING THE BAT

An important part of this ritual, of the ritualizing of heroic violence, is the way in which Commissioner Gordon calls on Batman in times of need: the bat signal. In Miller's graph-



Image 3

ic novel, the bat signal first appears on page 46 (Image 3). When another officer questions its use, Gordon emphasizes that that the bat signal is there “[t]o let everyone know” (45) that Batman is on the way. One way of interpreting this moment, and perhaps the common way to see it, is that the bat signal projects an intention to the rest of the city, innocent and criminal alike, and operates primarily through fear. That is, the bat signal strikes fear into the heart of would-be law breakers and as such is a tool of control through which the

state extends its power. This interpretation, however, misses what is perhaps most important about the bat signal. Just before turning it on, the other officer that helps Gordon references Gallagher, who would not be pleased with the use of the bat signal (46). If the purpose of the signal was simply to let the city know that Batman is on the prowl and thereby reduce crime and violence, then the state apparatus for the control of crime and violence, the police, would surely not object to its use. Yet as the officer who replaces Gordon as commissioner later in the narrative makes clear, Batman's actions—indeed, his very existence—are orthogonal to the state apparatus for the control of crime and violence: Batman's "actions are categorically criminal," and Yindel immediately "issue[s] an arrest warrant for the Batman on charges of assault, breaking and entering, [and] creating a public hazard" (72). This last charge, especially, puts the police department under Yindel squarely in the biopolitical purview Foucault outlined during the Cold War (which, coincidentally, is the sociopolitical context for the Miller's text) and, what is perhaps more important to my argument, excludes Batman from that same category of social control, a decidedly fascist form of control. In this light, then, the bat signal can and should be read in a differently; rather than signaling the inclusion of Batman into the state apparatus for violence, the projection of Batman's symbol (which, in Miller's representation, is done on one of Gotham's twin towers, signs of neoliberal commerce and therefore symbolic of yet another form of control) instead signals the *failure* of the state in its own stated mission of the social control of violence on behalf of the community. Batman's response to the signal, then, is not his inclusion in the state, which would thereby make him fascist; rather, the bat signal makes clear that Batman operates separate from and outside the parameters of the state and its agents of control,

offering another path towards the mitigation of violence in a community.

THE S.O.B.S

This is perhaps most clearly seen in Batman's appropriation of the Sons of Batman (the S.O.B.s) towards the end of the graphic novel. After their leader is defeated by Batman, the mutant gang splinters into several rival gangs. This outcome in itself speaks to the differing roles the mutant gang leader and Batman take on and play. Like fascist movements, the gang leader operates through a cult of personality in which he is the center of the group. This fascist tendency is depicted on page 73, where the reader sees the mutant gang leader, raised high and holding a torch, addressing the gang, who are lined up behind him in military-fashion. Note, as well, the gang leader's emphasis on group—"They call *us* a gang" (emphasis added)—on indiscriminate violence and on difference—"Only when *they* die by our hands and see *their women* raped" (emphasis added)—on will and strength—"We have the strength—we have the will"—and, finally, on the centers of power within the organization of the city—"Storm police headquarters" (73). Important, as well, is the way in which this moment is framed just prior to its appearance in the comic. Robin overhears two gang members talking, and one describes the coming speech as "[t]alkin' war" (71). This invocation of war, which is always a structural and measured implementation of organized violence and therefore very different from the interventional triangle described earlier in this article, makes clear that the mutant gang operates closer to the fascist ideology than Batman.

As such, when Batman confronts the S.O.B.s, who are planning to "purge Gotham" (171), on page 172, his emphasis is markedly different. Where the mutant gang leader told his

followers to “[t]ake the guns” (73), Batman says, holding up a gun, “This is the weapon of the enemy . . . We will not use it” (173). Rather, Batman’s methods are the opposite of the indiscriminate methods that typify the mutant gang’s actions: “Our weapons are quiet—precise” (173). And when he says that “[t]onight, we are the law” and that he “is the law,” we must keep in mind that this is not Bruce Wayne speaking. Because of the necessary distance the mask creates between the superhero and the individual—the ego and the alter-ego—the “I” in this panel is not an individual but a symbol, the symbol of the bat. It is through this process, by ritualizing his own identity, that Batman enters into the spreading violence of the city-wide riot (happening in the aftermath of the detonation of the U.S.S.R’s nuclear warhead) and reroutes it towards different ends, effectively turning what would have been an incredible spreading of violence into a way to keep the potential victims of that violence, who are also victims of violence already happening, safe. This moment, the spreading riot, is told through a series of images of the violence itself as well as commentary the various perspectives of people involved in that violence, offering conflicting interpretations of what happens. While the man with the neck brace, who engaged with the riot, says, “It was every man for himself” (180) and then rationalizes his actions by saying, “I did what anybody would’ve” (181), he never fully attends to the actions he does. Rather, he speaks about them obliquely, using language as a tool by which he can at once justify and avoid what he did. The man in the glasses, who is given voice in the same sequence, is better able to directly address his own actions: “I was strangling somebody when I heard the horses.” This man gestures towards the way the violence spreads when he comments, “I still can’t believe it got as bad as it did. You’d never have known that just a few minutes earlier, we’d been . . .” (181). This last comment is interesting, as it has

to do more with the reader's experience than the character's, pointing towards the construction of the narrative. Just before the beginnings of the riot, a very different kind of collective action is depicted; people spontaneously organize in order to fight a growing fire: "A line forms" (176).

The juxtaposition of these two moments, as well as the way they are separated by the scene depicting Superman's trial by fire in which he is caught in the detonation of the nuclear bomb, is necessary. It points towards two very human potentialities—that for organized aide and that for collective violence—that are always present; what tilts the scales from the former to the latter is spillage of the organized violence of war into the civil community through the detonation of the nuclear bomb and the disruption of the city's power grid, which then spreads through the community just as Girard conceives of the process. This is punctuated by the illustrations of fire, which on page 176 begin to take up whole panels. It is in this situational context that Batman and his converted S.O.B.s and mutant gang members—having "appeal[ed]" to their "community spirit" (176)—appear and work to stop the violence with their own mitigated form of it. Even here, two versions of the story are told through the man in the neck brace and the man in the glasses; the former compares Batman to the "Gestapo" (183), a clear reference to fascism, while the latter emphasizes how Batman got the fighting people to "fight the fire" (183), a reference to both the actual fire in the narrative and the spreading fire of community violence.

There are three important moments to consider as this sequence comes to an end. The first is that the story of the priest, which began with the start of the material and metaphorical conflagration, comes to an end in a moment of unity; the priest and the "boy with the radio" (184), who began

at odds with one another over the volume of the boy's music, end up tied to one another through their shared experience. The priest, who might be expected to be the more compassionate of the two, admits to having intended to "confront" the boy (179), while in the end it is the boy who "help[ed] the burned" (184). This moment is one that gestures the revolutionary possibility implicit in Batman's path through the paradoxes of heroic violence. At the same time, the very next frame, a half-page splash of the city, gestures towards the consequences of another kind of heroic violence. In the second moment, Superman, who in Miller's imagination is an agent of the state and has been involved throughout the narrative in the United States' escalating conflict with the U.S.S.R, has at this moment survived a nuclear explosion from a missile he diverted. This is a classic instance of super heroism, and yet the ramifications of the act are somber to say the least: "there wasn't any morning," and "one week later, it's still dark at high noon in Gotham City" (184). The blast, which might be read as the conclusion of Superman's deal with the (state) devil and therefore the necessary result of his increased moral corruption through an increased reliance on state sanctioned violence,⁸ brings about "completely disrupted" weather patterns, further "riots," "starving," "civil war in the Midwest" (185); that is, Superman's heroic act has the exact opposite result as Batman's, instead proliferating violence rather than stopping it.

The third and most important thing to consider is what Robin observes at the end of this sequence. On page 183, Robin sees Batman as he "sags in his saddle like an old man," witnessing the toll the work described above and in the rest of

8 Indeed, a large number of the panels in which Superman appears in Miller's graphic novel show him literally engaged in warfare or in discussion with heads of state. See pages 84, 120, 130, and 135 for examples.

the narrative—the work of being both the sacrificer and the sacrificed, of becoming a symbol so as to avoid the pitfalls of heroic violence—takes on Batman the man. The physical toll of being the Batman is evidenced throughout the narrative; Batman makes consistent reference to it himself, and Alfred puts perhaps too fine a point on it when he says, “If it’s suicide you’re after, Master Bruce, I have the recipe for an old family potion. It’s slow in working and quite painful. You’d like it” (43). After this moment of recognition of the humanness of the man behind the mask, behind the symbol, Robin says to herself, “He can’t die” (184). This statement operates in two ways: first, it is a recognition of the necessity of something like the Batman. Second, it is a cognization of the fact that he *will* one day die, as all old men eventually do. This is a detection of future absence and, for the reader if not for Robin as well, the realization that Robin is best positioned to fill that absence when it does come. In this way, Robin herself, her position in line with and at the side of Batman, becomes fundamental to the work he accomplishes through the methods described throughout this article. Batman’s involvement of Robin, which Commissioner Yindel calls “child endangerment” (138) and to which even Alfred is opposed (93), then becomes a future-oriented act designed to ensure the continuation of the work he has begun with his own actions. This is seen in his treatment of Robin: even though Batman claims that he will not “tolerate insubordination” (115), in fact Batman more than tolerates it. When Robin reprograms (after explicitly being told not to) the commands on the helicopter so that they respond to “peel” instead of “boosters” (129), Batman reaffirms her involvement and even appears amused or proud.

All of this is perhaps best represented, visually, in the splash in page 114 (Image 4): here, the reader sees Batman *and*

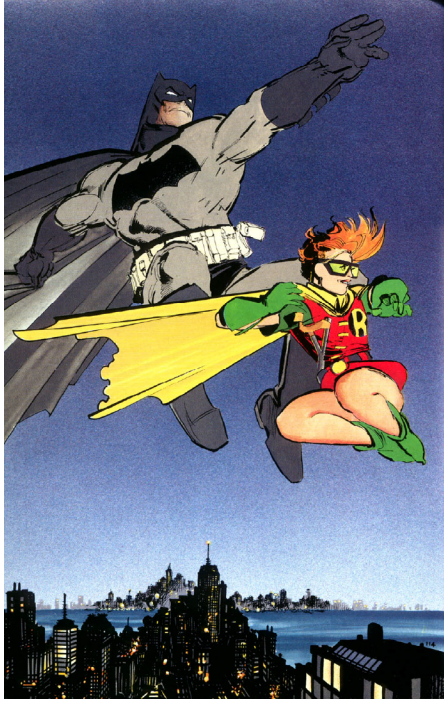


Image 4

Robin, both high above the city, leaping into space. They are both looking off page into some unknown vista; Batman has his left hand thrown forward, as if showing the way, but it is Robin who is slightly out front, already beginning to take the lead. When compared with other, similar splash pages in the novel—such as those on pages 34 and 52 and 78—this image of Batman and Robin contains within a noticeably hopeful aesthetic, an optimism made possible only through the inclusion of Robin and, therefore, through the promise of the continuation of the work Batman does. Batman explicitly recognizes the necessity of Robin to his actions when he thinks, referencing Robin, “Right there . . . is all the reason I need” (186). It is necessary to note that this kind of emphasis

on the future through generations of youths can in itself be appropriated by oppressive forces as a form of justification: it is common for “political value to be defined in terms of a future *for the children*” that “narrows the terms of the debate to those that ensure the protection of a symbolically innocent ‘Child’ and the dream of a clean, new future it symbolizes” (Lothian 8). In this mobilization of child as justification, the rhetoric of future generations can and has been used both as a way to justify fascism while at the same time removing the essential note of possibility that comes with thinking of the futurity of the young. When fascists say, “Think of the children,” they are generally more interested in defining, with oppressive specificity, the horizon of futures available to those children; we see this in “child endangerment” charge mentioned above. Batman, however, manages to side-step this problem through his radical inclusion of Robin in his work. This is represented in the text, explicitly, when Batman calls her a “good soldier” (138), elevating Robin, and therefore the future generation, to an active co-participant in the production of that future.

CONCLUSION

This inclusion of Robin in the creation of a more equitable future, a future that manages to acknowledge and address the realities of violence and, to some degree, the necessity of it, is further evidenced in the ending of the graphic novel. When Batman fakes his own death, two things happens—he symbolically kills the very source of whatever power he holds over the community in which he has been involved, thereby circumventing the real fascist tendency to hold onto and solidify power over time through the use of symbols and power structures that become in themselves stand-ins for history and therefore make any attempt to move beyond them anti-

thetical to the very notion of progress or possibility. Batman's symbolic death is, if he is to avoid becoming the very thing he is fighting in Superman at the end of the narrative, absolutely necessary—as Albert Camus writes in *The Rebel*, a meditation on how revolutionary projects themselves become totalitarian, the rebel, “in order to be a man, to refuse to be a god” (333). The death of Batman is just this kind of move—it kills the potential for fascism in the symbol while allowing Bruce Wayne the man to return. As the reader, our last image of the main character of the graphic novel is not him as Batman the symbol but as Wayne the man. Second, this symbolic death makes room in the future for new ways of being, ways of being that will necessarily be developed by the upcoming generation. In the final page of the narrative, a page that speaks to the futurist potential of the narrative as a whole, Wayne is distinctly not alone, some icon in the fight for law and order, nor is he to be found in some position of authority within the structures of the state or business. He has given all that up—even Wayne Manor is gone at this point—in favor of a position away from view, a position that allows for the inclusion of Robin, the next generation of his style of heroism, as well as the inclusion of the very people who were his “enemies”: the mutant gang and its offshoots. This speaks to the possibility for reconciliation and collectivity even in moments of extreme dissonance and social strife and projects the reconciliatory possibility represented in the riot/fire scene into the horizon of the future. This, finally, points towards a version of heroic violence that is, in the end, the exact opposite of the biopolitical fascism that Batman is often painted as engaging in. Rather, this ending, which is the result of Batman's actions overall, is itself life-affirming: the narrative ends by saying: “This will be a good life ... Good enough” (199).

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