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HEROIC SUBJECTIVITY IN FRANK MILLER'S THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS

Abstract. *The genre of superhero is challenging. How does one explain the subjectivity of the hero with superpowers, morality norms, justice orders and ideological backgrounds? Many authors and critics interpret superheroes in cultural, political, religious and social contexts. However, none has investigated a superhero's subjectivity as a dynamic and in-process phenomenon. The present paper examines the relationship between hero and subjectivity through Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). Miller shows the necessity of subjective dynamics for the sublime in a model of subjectivity that echoes with questions about the subject that has flourished within literary, psychoanalytic and linguistic theories since the mid-twentieth century. Thus, this study employs Julia Kristeva's concept of subject in process with the aim to indicate that subjectivity is a dynamic phenomenon in Miller's superhero fiction.*

Keywords: *Batman, subjectivity, justice, morality, subject in process*

Introduction

Recently, there has been a near-deafening whirl surrounding comic books. This is partly due, of course, to their adaptation into superhero blockbuster films.¹ But something else is also going on. There is a diversification of the content and its readers along race and gender lines. According to a recent interview with Frederick Luis Aldama, the comic book is “a material history and an aesthetic configuration” that depicts issues of social justice (“Realities of Graphic Novels” 2). Indeed, social justice and race as articulated within the superhero comic book storytelling mode is the focus of several recent PhD, MA and book-length monograph studies. For instance, Ashley (2015) puts race at the forefront to formulate a multidimensional model of racial identity to examine the superhero's identity in graphic

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¹ See Claverie, Ezra: *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre*. Liam Burke. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015. (2017): 422-425.

novels. Kirkpatrick and Scott (2015: 121) explore “the transmediated nature of contemporary superheroes and the issues surrounding their bodily (trans)formations and identity”. Krečić-Žižek (2016: 859) observes superheroes “as an answer to a distressful human condition”. Thomas (2017) investigates the identity of a female Muslim superhero in Kamala Khan’s Ms. Marvel. Aldama in his latest book, *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics*, formulates a geometric approach as a new way of seeing, thinking and feeling about the superhero.

Superhero comic books are part of graphic novels.² The genre is characterised by the conflict between a superhero and the dangers that threaten society. Superheroes such as Batman, Green Arrow and Iron Man operate with a great concern for justice and “what is right, often taking to the streets only after they have seen their local law enforcement fail time after time” (Russell, 2013: 123). The superhero fights against the injustice selflessly, willing to sacrifice his/her life regardless of the social orders and norms of society.

The Dark Knight Returns (1986) is a four-series superhero comic book starring Batman, written by Frank Miller, illustrated by Miller and Klaus Janson, and published by DC Comics³. *The Dark Knight Returns (TDKR)* illustrates the journey of Bruce Wayne in search of justice. Bruce Wayne, who has retired from fighting against crime, has a life full of conflicts and challenges. Even after his retirement, he is still engaged in what he must do to make things right within himself and within the city of Gotham. He has a complicated character that is hard to describe in one word; he stays in the shadows, away from sight while he flies over Gotham to see all. He comes to help victims at a time of disappointment while he herds a group of villains. He receives no money for his efforts and yet never runs out of money. He seems to be a hero and an antihero. These features make him an ambiguous character. Critics also have different opinions about Batman. Nathan Tipton (2008: 321) states “What are readers to make of an old man who is often described as a socialite, a confirmed bachelor, or a millionaire play boy with a propensity for adopting young boy as his wards”.

On the other side, Booker (2015: 65) explains that, although Batman used to be a vicious punisher of criminals, his motivation was to fulfil his “patriotic duty”. Further, Axelsson (2012: 10) observes:

Miller’s Batman has gone from the old school stereotypical detective to a nihilistic anarchistic vigilante. At first glance, when he uses all means to get to his goal, he is no better than the villains and criminals he is

² See Weiner, Stephen (2017): *The Development of the American Graphic Novel. The Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel*.

³ Accessible at <http://www.dccomics.com/>.

fighting, but he has to do this to clean the streets and re-establish law and order. This is what separates this new hero from the old school heroes, or the heroes of the golden age. We see that Batman is this ambiguous person when he wants to save Two Face and the Joker but also when it comes to Superman.

Axelsson sees no clear borders between crime fighter and villain, good and bad. Although Batman sometimes goes beyond the law, he does not consider himself above it. He may become involved in crime, but he does not support criminals. Miller illustrates the necessity of subjective dynamics echoing with questions about the subject that has flourished within literary, psychoanalytic and linguistic theories since the mid-twentieth century. Thus, this study uses Julia Kristeva's concept of subject in process to demonstrate that subjectivity is a dynamic phenomenon in *TDKR*.

Kristeva's Subject in Process

Kristeva believes that the subject is influenced by a signifying process; therefore, language and subjectivity are interconnected.⁴ Through the use of language, "the speaking subject makes and unmakes himself" (Kristeva, *Language-the Unknown* 265).⁵ For Kristeva, as Oliver observes, "any theory of language is a theory of the subject" (Oliver *Introduction to Kristeva* (1997: xviii)). Thus, Kristeva merged psychoanalysis and linguistics to define a speaking subject. She states:

The theory of the unconscious seeks the very thing that poetic language practices within and against the social order: the ultimate means of its transformation or subversion, the precondition for its survival and revolution. (Kristeva, 1974: 81)

Kristeva develops this transformation of the social order through a signifying process that forms the subject and meaning. She emphasises that

⁴ For this theory, Kristeva uses Lacan's theory of subjectivity. However, there are some differences between Lacan and Kristeva. Kristeva believes that the child acquires culture through mother and father, but previously Lacan has mentioned that only the father is responsible for that. In Kristeva's theory, chora is a maternal space and as there is no gap between the mother and child, the child can learn about civilisation from the mother as well. As such, "identification comes about under the domination of the maternal image, which is the one nearest to the child and which allows the child both to remain close and to distance itself" (Rice and Waugh: 130). The other difference is that Lacan believes that the subject's construction is as a result of symbolic effect and he ignores the inner drives. Whereas Kristeva emphasised that the inner desires, which she calls semiotic, is as important as the symbolic effect in subject formation.

⁵ In Kristeva's (1984: 13) observation, philosophies of language "are nothing more than the thoughts of archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs".

inner desires, which she calls semiotic, are just as important as the symbolic effect in subject formation. Otsuka (2008: 2) explains that “Kristeva claims that a child does not completely leave the semiotic behind, but carries residues of it even after entering into the symbolic”. As the inner desires influence subject formation and the desires are neither fixed nor stable, the subject is also not stable. Kristeva explains that linguistic practices “change in the status of the subject – his relation to the body, to others and to objects” (Kristeva, *Revolution*: 15–16). Moreover, Newton (1990: 182) emphasises that the subject is “a split subject influenced by bio-physiological processes (themselves already inescapably part of the signifying process; what Freud labelled ‘drives’), and, on the other hand, by social constraints (family structures, modes of production, etc.)”. Therefore, “the subject is caught between instinctual drives and social practices within language”⁶ (Kristeva, *Desire* 97).

The subject is always in the process of becoming. There is no unified subjectivity but a heterogeneous subject that can be affected by other people’s desires and speeches. As such, communication is a way that “makes and unmakes” subjectivity. (Kristeva, *Language* 265). In this regard, Iannetta (2002: 218) points out that “there are no stable individuals but rather permeable beings easily infected by the subjectivity of others”. The subject is in process as he/she is developed through language. Kristeva argues that subjectivity is fluid, dynamic and open to relations with others whose interactions provide resources to renew and create identities through symbolic reconstructions. Thus, the subject is always in process of becoming because he/she is always in a status of being tested against the various contexts where he/she finds himself/herself.

Batman: A Dynamic Subject

Batman’s enemies welcome his retirement since it gives them freedom to commit their crimes easily.

However, his fate is a dilemma, “Today also marks the tenth anniversary of the last recorded sighting of the Batman. Dead or retired, his fate remains unknown” (*TDKR* 11). No one is sure about Batman as he does not allow any news release about his life.

BUT BATMAN WAS A YOUNG
MAN. IF IT WAS REVENGE
HE WAS AFTER, HE’S TAKEN
IT. IT’S BEEN FORTY YEARS
SINCE HE WAS BORN...



⁶ For Kristeva, language is a subject that can be considered independently of the speaking subject, as Chomsky’s observation of language proposes (Kristeva, 1980). Kristeva’s theory is concerned with language as a procedure that issues directly from the body and its drives (the unconscious) and how these are connected to the symbol and generate the subject.



Batman becomes a 'subject' whose identity is mysterious. Kristeva prefers the term 'subject' over the concept of the 'self', which is an active conscious being in the world. However, a subject is usually unaware of the unconscious phenomena impressing thoughts and actions (McAfee, 2004). Unconscious phenomena are tensions, passions, repressions and desires that cannot easily be accessed by consciousness; however, they express themselves. According to McAfee (2004: 2), "the experience of subjectivity is not that of coming to awareness as a 'self,' but of having an identity wrought in ways often unbeknownst to the subject herself". Batman is a subject who has saved his country in many respects, but now the "younger viewers will not remember the Batman. A recent survey shows that most high schoolers consider him a myth" (TDKR 11). Kristeva (1984: 215) explains "The subject never is. The subject is only the signifying process and he appears only as a signifying practice, that is, only when he is absent within the position out of which social, historical and signifying activity unfolds"⁷.

Despite his disappearance and retirement, Batman returns when his nation needs him the most. However, the new generation considers him from their own point of view: "Wild animal growls. Snarls. Werewolf surely. Monster! Like with fangs and wings and it can fly" (TDKR 34). Iannetta mentioned that "there are no stable individuals but rather permeable being, easily infected by the subjectivity of others and



IRONICALLY, TODAY ALSO MARKS THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE LAST RECORDED SIGHTING OF THE BATMAN. DEAD OR RETIRED, HIS FATE REMAINS UNKNOWN.



OUR YOUNGER VIEWERS WILL NOT REMEMBER THE BATMAN. A RECENT SURVEY SHOWS THAT MOST HIGH SCHOOLERS CONSIDER HIM A MYTH.

⁷ The signifying process for Kristeva (1984) is the interaction of the symbolic and the semiotic. The symbolic mode considers meaning, grammar and syntax. The semiotic mode involves the subject's feelings, articulations and drives and is not based on grammatical and syntactic principles.

unsatisfactorily substitutable” (218). People do not trust Batman as a saviour of the nation, but they consider him as a threat. Batman’s subjectivity as a hero is not fixed, but changed based on the impressions of citizens and criminals.

Further, unlike what the reader expects, the young generation, mayor and police consider Batman a threat to their safety, “the council of mothers today petitioned the mayor to issue a warrant for the immediate arrest of the Batman, citing him as a harmful influence on the children of Gotham” (TDKR 59). Batman’s individuality cannot be contained by a single system, but can be shaped and reshaped through other people’s points of view. For older generations, Batman was a hero, but the new generation consider him as a threat – although Batman himself did not change in person, his subjectivity is being shaped and reshaped by people’s observations. From one side, the reader encounters a citizen who observes Batman “[a] ruthless, monstrous vigilante, striking at the foundations of our democracy” while, from the other, some citizens state that “a thousand people are fed up with terror – with stupid laws and social cowardice. He’s only taking back what’s ours” (TDKR 65). Further, some other citizens do not consider Batman as a saviour but as a mythical character. When people are informed that Batman is in the city, they are surprised because they “never thought he was real” (TDKR 36). This group of people becomes aware of him being a reality through the language of others. This is language that gives a state of being to the subject but the subject is not fixed – the subject is always on trial or in process as he is judged by other people’s impressions (Kristeva, 1984: 127).

Batman’s subjectivity is formed and reformed by people’s observations of him. Miller represents Batman as a figure “who is not yet constituted as stable” and his subjectivity is formed based on sociocultural constraints (Kristeva, 1984: 25).

Although Batman is aware his actions are not tolerated by the government as well as some citizens of Gotham, he continues with his disobedience. At this stage, the American government employs Superman to try to convince Batman to stop his crime fighting. However, he rejects Superman’s request, even though Superman warns him that “somebody’s going to order me to bring you



in, somebody with authority” (TDKR 119). Batman rejects legitimate state authority as fulfilling his own justice. Clearly, Superman and Batman have different attitudes to justice and order. Although Batman attempts to protect the citizens of Gotham and maintain order and justice, the government and Superman oppose Batman’s vigilante affairs. However, Bundrick (2012: 25) observes Batman with two minds regarding social order and justice. He states:

The figure we see in Miller’s text isn’t conflicted about being Batman so much as he is of two minds about whether to continue serving the woefully inadequate structures of law and order and have so utterly failed Gotham, or simply to strike out on his own self-proclaimed authority and serve his own sense of justice.

Bundrick (2012: 26) finds this duality to be the basic tension in Miller’s story. He continues that Miller presents “a cautionary figure whose conflicted relationship to the rules and order he protects has a lot to tell us about the complications surrounding authority and its expression in a modern democracy”. Miller’s Batman sticks to his personal codes of morality and justice beyond the orders and laws governing society. Richard Reynold illustrates the fundamental characteristics of the superhero genre through seven basic principles of the genre (Reynold, 119). His third law states “[t]he hero’s devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law” (Reynold, 1994: 16). Miller illustrates a provoking character who challenges the government’s authority and laws. The use of force by the government is often unsuccessful and unable to guarantee that crime is controlled. Moreover, Batman reflects a powerful symbol of justice, beyond the law. The reader can understand Batman’s values and norms of justice through his relationship with Superman. In their final battle, Batman tells Superman, “You sold out Clark. You gave them the power that should have been ours... We could have changed the world, now look at us. I’ve become a political liability, and you... you’re a joke” (TDKR 192-194). Miller shows that Batman has a mind of change with “political liability” opposed to Superman’s use of force and adherence to the US government.

Batman continues his actions to fulfil his desire for justice, even though some citizens misjudge his actions and express their misjudgement loudly.

In one scene, the police commissioner expresses he will issue “this arrest order for the Batman on charges of breaking and entering, assault and battery, creating a public menace” (TDKR 116).



They did not find the criminal behind the scene and the only person who was at the scene of the attack was Batman as he had intended to rescue the people. However, now he is considered a criminal, as “The rescue team sighted Batman at the scene” (TDKR 117). Therefore, they concluded that Batman is the one who put the city in danger. Batman is the subject that “is always both semi-otic and symbolic” (Kristeva, 1984: 24). These two modes are interconnected in the signifying process. For Kristeva, this is “a powerful model of the human in which language is not divorced from the body; ‘word’ and ‘flesh’ can meet at any moment for better or worse” (Kristeva, 1984: 6). According to Kristeva, the speaking subject is a “subject in process” (1984: 127). The subject in process is a subjectivity that revolts against the fixed identity (Smith, 1998). Kristeva explains that this subjectivity “gives us a vision of the human venture as a venture of innovation, of creation, of opening, of renewal” (Guberman, 1996: 26). Thus, the speaking subject is involved in expressing. Naturally, the symbolic refuses the semiotic, and the symbolic social order is inflexible in the reinforcement of its laws (Kristeva, 1984). Batman is both a symbolic and semiotic mode in Gotham with its rigid social order while he can never eliminate the “more fluid, playful, instinctual” semiotic (McAfee, 2004: 43). The symbolic order might attempt for unity, but signification is “a heterogeneous contradiction” (Kristeva, 1984: 187). Therefore, subject in process is “an impossible unity” (Kristeva, 1984: 118, 187) – “a splitting subject in conflict who risks being shattered and is on the brink of a heterogeneous contradiction”.

Batman’s semiotic mode makes him go against the present social order and establish his own justice. However, his friend warned him to stop whatever he is doing as it could lead him to prison.

As the news that Batman is involved in the criminal activities becomes widespread, his friends who know him and his intention intend to defend him: “How many times do I have to say it, Morris? Batman hasn’t killed anybody” (TDKR 148).

His friends know him; therefore, they are sure that Batman just wants to provide security for his own people. However, the newscasters, policemen and people as a symbolic order are so strongly against Batman that, even when a criminal dies, they accuse Batman: “The Joker’s body found mutilated and burned... murder is added to the charges against the Batman” (TDKR 160).



HOW MANY TIMES
DO I HAVE TO SAY
IT, MORRIS?
BATMAN HASN'T
KILLED
ANYBODY...



On the other side, superman was the one who put society in danger and now everyone defends him; “Commissioner Yindel refused to comment on the charge that Gotham’s police have been lax in pursuing the murder charge against the Batman” (TDKR 187).

...COMMISSIONER YINDEL REFUSED TO COMMENT ON THE CHARGE THAT GOTHAM'S POLICE HAVE BEEN LAX IN PURSUING THE MURDER CHARGE AGAINST THE BATMAN...



Yet, after so many events have taken place, they still blame Batman for all the crimes and are ready to arrest him as soon as they find him.

At the end, as Batman knows he has no chance of defending himself, in one of the fights against the criminals, he fakes his own death and the newscaster announces that “the spectacular career of the Batman came to a tragic conclusion... he has been identified as fifty-five year old billionaire Bruce Wayne and his death has proven as mysterious as his life” (TDKR 197).

...THE JOKER'S BODY FOUND MUTILATED AND BURNED... MURDER IS ADDED TO THE CHARGES AGAINST THE BATMAN..



Batman is a grey character and what makes him more complicated is the doubt and anxiety in social justice in Gotham where there is no longer a distinct border between good or bad; binaries are blurred in this postmodern graphic novel.

It is not only other characters’ opinions of Batman, but also his own speech, that contributes to the formation of his subjectivity. In this regard, Smith (1998) states that for Kristeva, “language will always speak the unspeakable as the unconscious will make itself known” (1984: 96). As people accuse Batman of being an animal, and call him wild, he expressed himself: “I’m a man of thirty of twenty again... the rain on my chest is a baptism” (TDKR 34). Although Bruce Wayne is fifty-five-years old, as Batman he feels thirty. He is against the criminals and uses the word ‘baptism’ to show there is no evil intention behind his actions.

REPEATING THE WEEK'S TOP STORIES-- THE SPECTACULAR CAREER OF THE BATMAN CAME TO A TRAGIC CONCLUSION...

... AS THE CRIMEFIGHTER SUFFERED A HEART ATTACK WHILE BATTLING GOVERNMENT TROOPS.

HE HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED AS FIFTY-FIVE YEAR OLD BILLIONAIRE BRUCE WAYNE-- AND HIS DEATH HAS PROVEN AS MYSTERIOUS AS HIS LIFE...



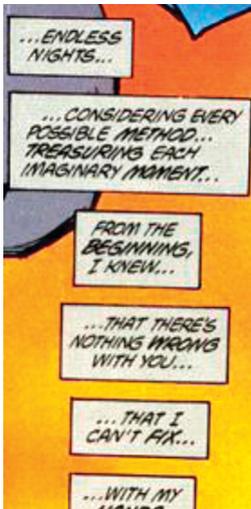
“The subject is committed to trial, because our identities in life are constantly called into question, brought on trial, over-ruled” (Waugh and Rice: 129). The subject on trial needs to express himself to shape his subjectivity. When everyone is against Batman, he needs to express his trust in his friends to receive their support, as for stopping his enemies, he asks his friends, “I’m counting on your help” (TDKR 97).

Sometimes, he cannot fight alone and he needs supporters. Then, he needs to think about the future before taking action. “Endless nights... considering every possible method... treasuring each imaginary moment... from the beginning, I knew... that there’s nothing wrong with you... that I can’t fix... with my hands” (TDKR 142).



He is confident that, when he plans well, he will be able to defeat his enemies.

Batman faked his death to fight against the criminals in the future as he witnesses that the police are so irresponsible in taking action against criminals; “That was the first thing Robin told me... when she dug me up” (TDKR 198). He took some chemical materials that stopped his organs for a short while; therefore, people would believe that Batman had died. He still has plans for those criminals.



Conclusion

To sum up, Miller’s Batman puts all his efforts in fighting against criminals to save his country and achieve justice. He is ready to sacrifice his life for the sake of his people. In Batman legends, the reader expects to face a Superhero who is both respected and disrespected by his people and nation, but his subjectivity is not only defined by his good deeds. As a result, the reader encounters Batman who is a superhero and at the same time a menace to society. It is language that makes Batman and forms his decisions, actions, reactions and desires. For Kristeva, language is not a tool simply utilised by selves, but something that produces subjects. Batman is a

subject in process – including both symbolic and semantic modes – having interactions with his surroundings and other subjects. These interactions take place in an environment including procreations and rejections, and that allows the subject to live, grow, make, remake and destroy but at the same time to give something to the outside.

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